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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Active Engagement of Young Adults in the Church and A Sense of Belonging

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Transformational Leadership

Marty A. Bullis, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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2019

Abstract

Research has shown a continuous decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within religious communities. A number of analyses have indicated that young adults are not feeling a sense of belonging, which leads to their withdrawing or disengaging from the church. The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between a sense of belonging and active engagement of African American young adults who are within the church. This descriptive study presents findings from an analysis of data from the 2001 congregational life survey and contemporary interviews with young adults who were active church members in the Methodist tradition. Data from the historical survey data analysis and contemporary interviews yielded important findings about attitudes regarding a sense of belonging and church engagement for two different generations. The study offers insights around six factors of engagement—involvement, activity, roles, decision-making, friends, and encouragement. The findings determined that there is a connection between a sense of belonging and engagement. Young adults who felt a sense of belonging were more involved in community and outreach ministries, participated in more group activities, held more roles in the church, participated in more decision-making opportunities, and felt encouraged by church leaders and older members. Even though, a sense of belonging is not affected by the friendships established in the congregation, having some close friends in their respective congregation is a factor.

Keywords: sense of belonging, engagement, involvement, activity, roles, decision-making, friends, encouragement

Dedication

Growing up in a family of strong Christian faith, and in a denomination with a rich heritage, it was etched in my heart to serve the church and God through my service – time, money, and talents. From the time I was a little girl, I was involved in the church, so it became disheartening as I became a young adult, and especially a pastor’s wife, to see how disengaged and less involved the young adult population has become in the life of the church. The youth and young adult generations represent the future leaders of the church, and their lack of engagement leaves one to wonder about the future existence and effect of the church.

So, studying this phenomenon was important to me. Therefore, this dissertation is being dedicated to the young adults of the church, not only in the Methodist tradition, but all denominations. There are so many Christian young adults who want to engage in their church but are discouraged for one reason or another. Hopefully, this dissertation will be their “voice.” This lack of engagement is a growing issue and will never get better until their [young adults] voices and their perspectives are heard and understood, and action is taken.

This is also dedicated to church leaders in hope that it will inform and inspire them to step back, take a closer, but transparent look at themselves, and wholeheartedly make changes that will motivate and encourage this lost generation in our churches to become engaged.

Acknowledgements

First, I thank God for His sustaining power because I know that He gave me the strength and motivation to complete this dissertation, and most importantly, this degree. For those many days I just wanted to give up, I had to remind myself that “My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth” (Psalms 121:2), and that, if I trust Him, and put Him first in everything I do, He will show me the way and crown my efforts with success (Proverbs 3:5–6). So, I thank you Lord, over and over again!!!

I am so grateful for my dissertation team who was incredibly helpful and unselfish in imparting their knowledge and assistance to my success. Thank you for your dedication and guidance throughout this process. Your motivation and encouragement were most helpful.

I thank my Mom, Margaret Owens, who I know continually prayed for my strength and my patience throughout this process. Thank you for being my “Superwoman.” Even though my Dad, Bernard Owens did not make it to see me to the end, I thank him for always encouraging me to never quit until I got what I want.

To my wonderful family, my husband, the Rev. Dr. Brian L. Williams and our children, Jayson (20) and Brianna (18). Thank you all for being so great, supportive, and motivating. Thank you for encouraging and pushing me every step of the way; even on those days, Bri would fuss at me by saying “Ma, you gotta get up and work on your paper”, despite me wanting to give up and go to sleep, or Brian saying “Cyndi, you just gotta step away from it for a moment, then get back to work!”. Thank you all for never giving up on me. I always thank God for you all. I love you to the moon and back!!!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Problem

According to a 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2015b), the decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within Christian religious communities has become a worldwide issue, not limited to any religious denomination, race, or location. Church pastors, leaders, and members, young and old, devote a significant amount of time and energy creating and maintaining exciting ministries in local Christian congregations to engage young persons and pass on the faith to the next generation. Many young adults have disengaged from God and the church. The Pew data supports the idea that although some will return to the faith later in life as they face some of the most troubling years of their lives, the lack of engagement within these intervening years may have a significant impact. Therefore, for those who never reengage, there is a significant loss for the young adults and the church. Even though the spiritual health of a church is multifaceted, and obviously cannot be determined solely on attendance, attendance is a factor in determining active engagement and participation in church ministries. Understandably, when people do not attend church, they cannot participate or engage in the ministries of the church. The lack of attendance and active engagement can affect the vitality of the church, and lead to a dying congregation and possibly a dying denomination.

Probe Ministries (2011), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to renew the minds of believers and equip the church to engage the world, reported about one-fourth of young adults are active in the church. Probe Ministries (2011) encouraged leaders of churches and Christian organizations to learn how to connect to young adults to establish vibrant, effective 21st-century ministries. The loss of the young adult population has been a critical issue facing thousands of leaders of the denomination that is the focus of this study. In this dissertation the researcher will

use the following pseudonym when referring to the denomination and any literature associated with the denomination: *Southeastern Methodist Church* (SMC). In September of 2002, the SMC commissioned a Strategic Planning Core Team (SPCT) to begin working on a plan to “reform, reorganize, and restructure” the church for the 21st century. After the study, the church leaders expressed concerns for a lack of engagement and a decline in the youth and young adult population. Several efforts to combat this issue were implemented (SMC, 2016).

The present research study examined variables that affect active engagement in the life of African American young adults between 21 and 39 years old, and in what ways a sense of belonging may be related to the phenomenon of a lack of active engagement. The first step to addressing this issue is understanding young adults and their beliefs (Probe Ministries, 2011). The researcher sought to understand the phenomenon by analyzing data from a 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and 2018 interviews of current African American young adults in the SMC.

Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem

The SMC is a denomination with a rich history birthed in the 19th century out of segregation and discrimination. For African Americans, the Black church was “a sanctuary for praise and worship of Christ. Here members could express themselves freely and unite culturally in their beliefs and life practices” (Kroll, 2016, para 10). Despite significant growth within the Black church during the Civil War and the Reconstruction, a generation of African American young adults began to leave the church. The church no longer held a position of relevance for the young adult population because the reality of their lives was not addressed. Even though the SMC is more diverse today, the Black church continues to be a place of worship and source of strength for many African Americans. Despite these changes, church membership for the SMC is currently over two million members (World Council of Churches, 2017).

In September of 2002, the SMC began to reform, reorganize, and restructure for the 21st century. According to the Strategic Plan (SMC, 2016, para 1), the goal of this restructure was “to develop a vibrant, growing denomination that accomplishes the Great Commission,” as instructed in Matthew 28:16–20, to spread Jesus’ teachings to all nations. The Great Commission laid the foundation for the biblical model of the denomination’s mission statement, “to minister to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people” (SMC Sunday School Union, 2017, p. 23). The SMC’s Strategic Planning Core Team (SPCT) consists of 90 members, a small representative of the SMC’s membership, but representative of all levels that includes Bishops, General Officers, Presiding Elders, Pastors, Lay Persons, and Youth. Their goal was to examine and analyze data from research that would yield recommendations, legislation, and action plans to ensure the growth and vitality of the denomination (SMC Church, 2016).

The strategic planning team identified 13 issues as the most pressing wake-up call for the SMC. The first and third issues are the focus of this study: the decline in youth and young adult membership, and the retention and inclusion of young adults. This decline in young adult retention could eventually be detrimental to the future of the SMC. Without the presence and engagement of this population, the church will fail to produce future leaders, become a dying denomination, and ultimately lose their position in the African American faith community upon which the church was initially built.

Much research has been done on this worldwide religious phenomenon, but none has been specifically conducted on African American young adults of the SMC. To the religious community, this study is significant and may provide answers to many questions in relation to church growth, and retention and inclusion of the African American young adult population. Research on young adult engagement offers many similarities to the factors secular and non-secular organizations face when dealing with this missing generation. Thus, this study may also

help other organizations dealing with young adult retention and inclusion issues. Utilizing studies that have been conducted on young adult engagement in organizations (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002), the present study focused on previous research findings from the United States Congregational Life Survey (USCLS; 2001) that analyzed contributing factors to the decline in African American young adult engagement in the faith community. Even though the previous studies from the USCLS are not specifically focused on young adults of the SMC, nor specifically on African American young adults, the findings are significant and inclusive to the young adult population of the church.

Statement of the Problem

A church lacking the presence of a young adult population signifies a church with a dying congregation. It is important that churches identify the factors that can lead to active engagement of church members age 21–39 in church ministries. The problem is that the SMC, as well as other denominations and organizations, have noticed a decrease in the attendance and engagement of young adults in the 21–39 age range. This decrease can ultimately lead to a dying congregation or organization.

Purpose of the Study

The SMC Church organized the young adult council for members age 21–39 in 1996, as a vehicle to engage and retain them [young adults] for service to the church and the upbuilding of the Kingdom. The mission statement of the young adult council of the SMC is “to minister to the intellectual (mind), physical (body), and spiritual (spirit) needs of the member of the SMC” (Denominational literature source, 2017, p. 412). The goal of the young adult council is “to retain young adults to the Lord, the church, and to lead young adults to use their gifts and talents in the service of the Lord” (Denominational literature source, 2019). Based on this goal, it is natural that leaders of the SMC will want to examine strategies for increasing and maintaining active

engagement of their young adult members to secure a vibrant future for the SMC. The expectation was young adults would be more motivated to increase their engagement in church ministries when they feel a sense of belonging (Shafi, Khemka, & Choudhury, 2015). The purpose of this descriptive research study was to examine and describe how whether the fulfillment of feeling a bond and sense of belonging is associated with the active engagement of young adults in church ministries. Young adults are more motivated to increase their engagement in church ministries when they feel that they have established bonding relationships within their congregation and feel a sense of belonging or purpose in the ministries of their respective place of worship (Shafi et al., 2015).

Research Question

To prepare the church for 21st-century ministry, the inclusion and retention of the young adult population are vital. Understanding what factors caused young adults age 21–39 to become less actively engaged in ministries of their local church and determining if the lack of active engagement in the young adult population is related to the need to belong based on the four drive theory of motivation, are important. Thus, the research question for this study is:

RQ. What relationship exists among young African American adults between their sense of belonging in a church and level of engagement in church ministries?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

Despite efforts to develop a connectional young adult ministry component of the SMC, this age group is underrepresented at many SMC churches. As a denomination with a rich history, the need to develop a generation of young adults who will keep the church growing is a must. The young adult council has a fourfold purpose which includes discipleship, leadership, fellowship, and networking (ameced.com, 2019). Their ultimate desire is to retain young adults and lead them to use their gifts and talents for the Lord and the church. The SMC, like many other denominations,

have lost many talented, effective, and motivated young adults. Many are apprehensive about participating in the ministries of the church for unknown reasons. They have taken their talents and gifts to other churches to help build the ministries of those churches, or they are holding back on utilizing their talents and gifts in their home church (Blackaby, 2019). This research will help the leadership on all levels of the SMC gain a better understanding of why young, talented adults are leaving the church, and what strategies will help to sustain and increase the active engagement of young adults ages 21–39.

The SMC is the first fully independent Black denomination in the United States. Based on the SMC's reformation, reorganization, and restructuring effort to develop and maintain a vibrant, growing denomination, the need to implement strategies that will motivate, encourage, and maintain active engagement of the future leaders, is necessary. As the denomination continues to grow, the need to meet the church's objective is a must. The objective of the SMC states:

to meet the needs of every level of the Connection and in every local church, the SMC Church shall implement strategies to train all members in (a) Christian discipleship, (b) Christian leadership, (c) current teaching methods and materials, (d) the history and significance of the SMC, (e) God's biblical principles, and (f) social development to which all should be applied to daily living. (SMC, 2016, p. 13)

This includes the need to educate and prepare the youth and young adults for the 21st-century church.

Definition of Terms

Active engagement. In the context of this study, active engagement is defined as consistent church attendance (at least two Sundays in a month), and active participation in at least three church ministries or organizations (i.e., as Church School, Women/Men's Groups, choir, outreach projects, etc.). Pew Research Center (2015a) created a scale to analyze congregational

involvement using three measures: “membership in a congregation, frequency of attendance at worship services, and frequency of attendance at small group religious activities” (para. 3).

Gailliard and Davis (2017) defined involvement as

regular attendance at weekly worship services, giving through time, talents, and tithes, participating in and volunteering for church activities, being part of small-group fellowships, serving at the church, serving in the community with the church, and financially supporting the church (p. 123).

Generation X. In the context of this study, Generation X is defined as a generational cohort between 1965 and 1980 (Baker-Rosa & Hastings, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2015).

Millennials/Generation Y. In the context of this study, millennials, also referred to as Generation Y, is defined as a generational cohort born between 1981 and 1997 (Baker-Rosa & Hastings, 2016; Nelson, James, Miles, Morrell & Sledge, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2015).

Sense of belonging. In the context of this study, a sense of belonging is defined as being an accepted and important member of a group. A sense of belonging is motivated by our drive to bond and belong as identified in the four drives of motivation by Lawrence and Nohria (2002).

Young adults. In the context of this study, Young Adults is defined as members of the age group 21–39, as defined by the young adult council of the SMC.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

For the purposes of this study, the factors affecting the active engagement of young adults are consistent and not restricted to specific religious denominations or geographic location. The assumption is that young adults throughout the world experience similarities among the factors that have affected their level of engagement. The study assumed participating young adults would be honest in responding to their level of engagement in their local church. Another assumption is participants provided responses that are not based on the responses of others.

Despite this being a phenomenon that has affected churches all over the world, and is not limited to specific denominations, races, or geographic location, the study was delimited to African American young adults in a southeastern geographical area. The study was also delimited to young adults in the 21–39 age range based on the focus group of the young adult council of the SMC, the denomination to which the researcher is involved and chose to be the focus of the study. As a leader in the SMC, the researcher was interested in the impact of a sense of belonging and the engagement of young adults specifically in the SMC. However, the results of the study could be a benefit to other denominations, races, and geographical location, and provide a pathway for future studies.

The researcher recognizes certain limitations essential in conducting this research study. Limitations to this research study included weaknesses associated with the sample of respondents from the 2001 USCLS, an 18-year-old data set. Using the USCLS data set also posed another limitation, the use of data from the Presbyterian denomination rather than the Methodist denomination, which is the focus of the study. Research on this specific group of subjects, 21 to 39-year-old African Americans, was very limited, so data had to be disaggregated from a racial-ethnic study conducted almost 20 years ago in the Presbyterian Church. The USCLS was the only resource available that provided information on sense of belonging in church members and their engagement in church. However, I was able to pull out data on the targeted group and use the qualitative data from the 2018 interviews to see how they compared. These limits may impact the study negatively or compromise the accuracy of the study results.

Chapter 1 Summary

The SMC is the first independent African American denomination in the United States, birthed in 1816, and has grown to over two million members over the past 200 years. In 2002, due to a decline in membership and the exiting of the youth and young adult populations, the SMC

initiated a 2-year strategic planning effort to revitalize the church. Based on the continued decline and less active engagement of the young adult population, this study will examine the characteristics of the African American young adult population and explore factors that have affected their active engagement in the church.

For this study, the young adult population refers to members 21–39 years old. This age group is defined by the SMC as the young adult council. According to Ingram (n.d.), if churches want to have successful ministries, they must study what successful churches are doing and then pray to God for revelation knowledge on how they can do the same. The purpose of the study is twofold. In this study, the researcher first examined factors that have affected the decline in the active engagement of young adult members (ages 21 to 39) of the SMC, then explored whether the four drives of motivation are related to this lack of active engagement of members of the young adult population.

Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) found that most young people with a Christian background are less engaged in church, but not losing their faith. Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) pointed out that as the number of religious unaffiliated groups increase, so is their influence. This means that the SMC, as well as other denominations, must pay more attention to the young adult population and find innovative ways of motivating, attracting, and communicating with them in order to retain them. Factors for the decline of active participation for this age group were examined based on quantitative data from a 2001 survey and 2018 interviews of the African American young adult population and what motivates them to become actively engaged in the church. The researcher hopes that providing a better understanding of these factors will assist in the exploration of successful strategies that may increase the motivation and active engagement of the African American young adult population of the SMC, and ultimately work for religious and secular organization worldwide. Achieving this will provide information related to issues one and three of

the strategic planning efforts of the SMC: the decline in membership, specifically youth and young adult; and the retention and inclusion of young adults.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Religion has always had special importance in the lives of African Americans. Thus, the Black church has played a major role in the African American community (Markstrom, 1999; Taylor, Chatter, & Brown, 2014). In addition to its spiritual mission, the Black church has served as a place for the development of a community that promoted a sense of belonging and helped members cope with existential crises. It provided social, financial, and emotional support, as well as the maintenance of cultural traditions and beliefs, religious values and attitudes. From the early days of slavery, the church was a place of gathering that provided safety, identity, and support for slaves (Chandler, 2017). After emancipation, the church became the only place where African Americans could not only worship but express emotions and release feelings of oppression. Black religious meetings were a threat to White slave owners, so Black slaves established and relied heavily on their churches. Religion and the Black church were important to African Americans and their efforts to endorse human and civil rights for their community (Ross, 2012). This literature review will provide an overview of scholarly literature and research related to this study's problem. The chapter is organized into the following sections: a sense of belonging, understanding the young adult population, the importance of the motivation and engagement, a description of each of the four drives of motivation and their relation to the young adult population, and literature suggested strategies to attracting and facilitating lasting and active engagement of young adults in church.

A Sense of Belonging

Feeling a sense of community is one of the primary characteristics of the Christian faith tradition (Krause, 2016). Therefore, to benefits from their community of faith, Christians must feel a sense of belonging and feel they are an important part of it (Krause, 2016). Stroope (2011) identified a sense of belonging to any group as an important and powerful need. The level of

emotional bond one has for a group is a deciding factor for whether one becomes an active member, exerts effort for the group, or even continues to participate in the group at all. This may explain why young adults who do not feel a sense of belonging to an organization, including the church, tend to withdraw or lessen their engagement and participation in the organization. Krause (2012) stated “a sense of belonging in a congregation involves more than religious affiliation” (para. 9). It promotes a feeling of taking part in the group, identifying with the group, participating in the group, and receiving motivation from the group.

The need to belong—to feel love and affection, and to be a part of a group—is one of the more basic needs on Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. Because the need to belong has a more basic level, it is understood to be a fundamental need that must be met before one can fulfill the need for esteem and self-actualization. The lower the need in the hierarchy, the more fundamental it is, and the more a person will abandon the higher needs to work on meeting the lower needs. This affirms the importance of this basic, yet critical human need.



Figure 1. Hierarchy of needs. Adapted from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by Saul McLeod, 2018.

In 1995, Mark Leary and Roy Baumeister supported Maslow's theory on the need to belong when they proposed the inability to create a bonding relationship or the breakdown of a sense of belonging may have a negative, long-term effect on an individual, to include their psychological and physical health, as well as their overall well-being (Pillow, Malone, & Hale, 2015). There must be frequent, ongoing interaction to prevent this negative effect—a break down in establishing a bonding relationship. Young adults, or people of any age, are more likely to feel a sense of belonging when they receive support or feel valued by fellow members of their organization or congregation (Mammana-Lupo, Todd, & Houston, 2014). Genuine care, unconditional love, and support are important to young adults. They desire to feel welcomed, loved and cared for in any organization (Brown, 2016). However, if the lack of bonding continues to break down, young adults will ultimately decide not to exert much effort in being an active participant or member of the organization.

Hayashi (2016) stated the need to belong has a direct connection to establishing interpersonal relationships demonstrated by companionship, communication, confidentiality, mental stability, and the development of roles in society. Many people seek out this sense of belonging and bonding through their involvement in organizations, whether it be political, ethnic, religious, professional, or recreational (Stroope, 2011). However, this choice to become involved is precipitated on their belief in what the organization represents. Engaging in religious activities, such as Bible studies and small group discussions, offers the opportunity for personal conversations in a space of trust (Henderson, 2014). Establishing these interpersonal relationships encourages and promotes a sense of belonging in congregational life.

Van der Merwe, Grobler, Strasheim, and Orton (2013) reported a worldwide decrease in church membership and attendance dating back as far as the 1960s. This decrease includes less involvement and a continuous decline in young adult attendance within the church. Reed (2014)

pointed out the decline in membership in mainline denominations beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s. By the 1990s and the beginning of the century, evangelical churches began to lose members. This church dropout phenomenon was prominent among the millennial generation, unlike their parents and grandparents. These young adults often withdrew from organized religion altogether. Unfortunately, the trend continued to grow. According to Putnam, Sander, & Campbell (2011), a 2006 Faith Matters Survey found that about 25% of millennials left the church, and a 2011 follow-up survey showed this number had increased to almost 33% (ARDA, 2006). According to Reed (2014), if this decline continues, it is possible that the number of unchurched millennials will be more than the churched millennials by the end of 2020. A 30-year trend analyses from the American General Social Survey (AGSS) has demonstrated a 0.25% reduction each year in church attendance. This represents a modest, but significant reduction. It is debatable whether a 0.25% reduction represents an actual decline or a stability in attendance. However, there is no evidence of an increase in attendance (Brenner, 2016).

According to Brown, Taylor, and Chatters (2015), African Americans have high rates of religious participation based on measures of their spirituality, their reading of religious material, and time spent watching or listen to religious broadcasts, in addition to measures of their attendance in religious services (Chatters, Taylor, Bullard, & Jackson, 2008; Chatters, Taylor, Jackson, & Lincoln, 2008). There is great importance on religion, prayer, social support, and religious participation and affiliation in this community (Brown, Taylor, & Chatters, 2013). Cobbins (2016) stated, “Despite these findings, the National Opinion Research Center in 2000, reported that ‘membership and church attendance in the Black church has decreased 5.6% for millennials between 1995 and 2000’” (p. 16). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the SMC is a denomination with a very rich history birthed out of segregation and discrimination. Even though it has grown to include over two million members and its high levels of social support for

members, the SMC recognized a need to reform, reorganize, and restructure the SMC for the 21st century. According to the 2002 plan, there was a decline in membership, specifically in the youth and young adult population, and a need for retention and inclusion. Based on the age distribution data from Pew, the population of young adults continued to decline from 2007 to 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2017b). This decline in young adult retention could eventually be detrimental to the future of the church (Davis & Mayo, 2017).

Based on interviews with pastors of various Black denominations, many congregations are concerned about their inability to maintain a steady young adult population (Davis & Mayo, 2017). Many pastors and church leaders struggle to engage the young adults of the church (Hamman, 2016). Many churches appear more concerned about increasing their young adult population than about looking for more appropriate and empowering ways of engaging and sustaining the young adult population (Stanton, 2012). Church leaders of all Christian denominations want to know what factors produce actively engaged young adults in their churches. The SMC established a young adult council as a vehicle to minister to the young adults, ages 21–39, in hopes of engaging and retaining them for service to the church and the upbuilding of the Kingdom. The mission statement of the young adult council of the SMC is “to minister to the intellectual (mind), physical (body), and spiritual (spirit) needs of the member of the SMC” (Denominational literature source, 2017, p. 412). The presence or absence of young adults can have an enormous effect on the future of the church. Without young adults, the church cannot grow. Young adults have not rejected their beliefs in Christ but have rejected organized religion. (Ammerman, 2013; McDowell, 2017). According to Cooper and Mitra (2018), “African American young adults are increasingly disengaging from religion due to perceived conflicts with organizational and institutional norms” (p. 513). Young adults expressed finding conflicts between the institutions teachings and new information they were learning about religion and religious practices. Some young adults

struggled with institutional doctrines that threatened their self-identity, as well as teachings that were logically incoherent and often hypocritical. Therefore, it is important that the church, as an institution, try to better understand the source of this rejection and regain this population of Christians.

Based on the family life cycle theory, high engagement with the church is common during childhood (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). A child's early religious socialization is greatly influenced by parents and other adults. During adolescence there is, according to the theory, a decrease in engagement with parents, and peer influences begin to outweigh parental influences. According to O'Connor, et al. (2002), the social learning theory suggests that teenagers become less engaged in the church and become more assimilated with the behaviors and attitudes of their peers. Similarly, the social learning theory suggests that "as an adult, one's attitudes, beliefs, and values and those of his or her adult friends influence the person's religious and church involvement" (O'Connor et al., 2002, p. 724). Van der Merwe et al. (2013) suggests, during adolescence and young adult stages, "young adults leave the church altogether, but a small number do return in their late 20s and early 30s" (p. 1). This disassociation has been a continuous concern of the religious population.

A survey conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research on the engagement of young adults discovered that despite young adults representing 23% of the U.S. population, they only represent 10% of congregations (Thumma & Bird, 2015). The study reported 18% of congregations have no representation in this age group. This is alarming when a thriving young adult ministry typically signifies a thriving congregation with growing children and youth ministries. Churches with strong young adult presence reported increased attendance (36.1%) and maintained attendance (49.6%) over time. They were reported as being more spiritually energetic, more caring and supportive, more accepting of challenges, more focused and aware of social

justice issues, and more deliberate in creating and offering a variety of small group ministries (Swanson, 2017). The study also found that churches that made young adult engagement a priority were much more likely to have an active engagement of young adults compared to those who did not. It can thus be concluded that churches must intentionally establish strategies for reaching, retaining and growing their young adult population.

Conceptual Framework

The lack of active engagement of young adult church members is not a new phenomenon but has been an ongoing struggle for church leaders and pastors. Reasons for this lack of active engagement are unknown. Many Americans exhibit a decline in their religious practices during early adulthood. Unfortunately, no consensus has been discovered in identifying specific reasons. Nevertheless, while church leaders and pastors seek strategies to connect with the young adult population, gaining a clear understanding of the causes for this lack of active engagement is important.

Even though there is a trend of disengagement among young adults in the church, there is good news. Barna Group (2013b) reported that masses of Millennial Christians want to connect to customs of their church upbringing and feel enthusiastic about being involved in the church while expressing concern for the future of their faith. Over 40% are concerned about their generation leaving the church, while another 41% desire “a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity” (Barna Group, 2013b, para. 15). Nearly one-third of these young adults say they are currently more excited about church. Despite these statistics, there is still hope for increased and sustained involvement.

Based on a study conducted by Simmons (2015) young adults identified four reasons for their decline in active engagement, which included a decline in church attendance and participation in church ministries:

1. An enormous work pressure and choices for leisure and social activities;
2. A belief that the church is too controlling and does not deal with real-life issues;
3. A theoretical difference between Christianity and science; and
4. A belief that Christians are ‘phony’, and the church is boring. (p. 65)

An urgency exists to determine what strategies could motivate and increase the participation and engagement of young adult church members. Just as businesses use marketing strategies to recruit members, by using well-established marketing theories and principles, churches could encourage young adults to return and remain in the church (Van der Merwe, et al., 2013). Lawrence and Nohria (2002) conducted cross-disciplinary research and found “four drives that led to high levels of engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and a reduced intention to quit, and ultimately better, performance” (Lee & Raschke, 2016, p. 165). According to Nohria et al. (2008), the four drives are hardwired into a person’s brain and contingent upon the degree to which the drives are fulfilled, a person chooses to actively engage or not to actively engage in an organization. This choice to engage is directly affected by a person’s emotions and behavior. Based on the four-drive theory of motivation, there are four underlying drives that should be fulfilled to increase engagement and motivation of its participants (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002). This theory is essential for organizational leaders to consider when trying to increase engagement of members. The theory initially included the drive to achieve, to bond, to be challenged, and to defend. An assumption is the theory is also relevant when considering engagement in ministries of the church.

The Lantern Group (2017), a behavioral science consulting firm, has worked with organizations to improve how leaders and people work within the organization to increase the engagement and motivation of the workforce. Over the years, the Lantern Group (2017) further developed the four drives theory contending that the additional descriptors helped deepen the

understanding of each drive. The four updated drives are to acquire and achieve, to bond and belong, to challenge and comprehend, and to define and defend. This study looked deeper into the expanded version of the four drives theory and determine if there is a relation in the fulfillment of the four drives to increase engagement of young adults in church ministries.

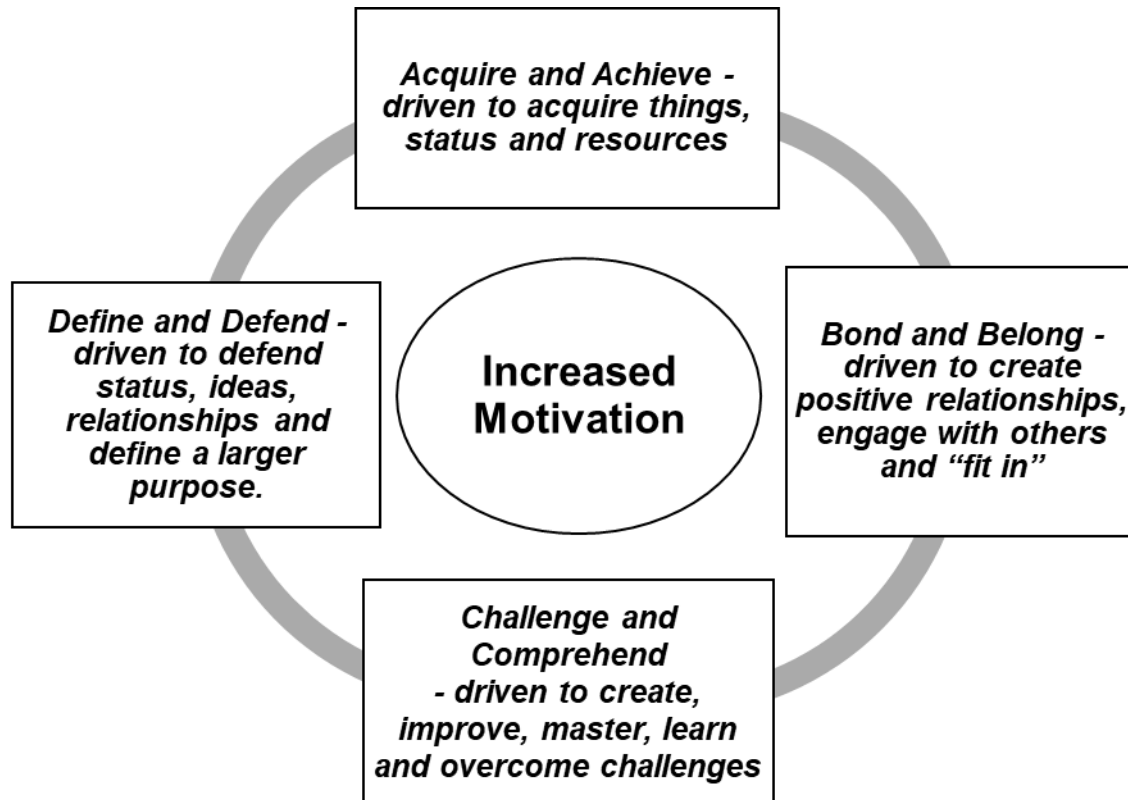


Figure 2. The four drives and motivation. Adapted from <http://blog.lanterngroup.com/category/employee-motivation> by Kurt Nelson, 2016.

A study conducted by the Barna Group (2013a) identified four multifaceted efforts that have facilitated long-lasting, active engagement of young adults in the church compared to those who have dropped out of the church:

1. Establishing meaningful relationships;
2. Developing discernment skills to better understand today's culture;
3. Using their gifts and skills in church ministries;
4. Establishing a deeper connection or sense of intimacy with God

The facets from the Barna Group findings have some connection to the concepts identified in the four drives theory. This study focused on these four efforts, the four drives, and other discoveries from studies on young adult disengagement. Through these discoveries, a better understanding of the factors that have affected the active engagement of young adults in the SMC would be developed. By understanding the factors affecting the decline, this study provides information to the church leaders, congregations, and individuals of the SMC to help their young adults become consistent, actively engaged members of their respective churches.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

An important focus for church pastors and leaders is to ensure active engagement of members in the life of the church (Hamman, 2016). This is not limited to regular attendance, but actively and consistently participating in the various ministries of the church, such as church school, the various auxiliaries and groups, serving in leadership positions, participating in the choir or the usher board, participating in the various outreach ministries and functions of the church, and supporting the church through their time and finances. For the SMC, this involves active engagement of the young adult members to continue the purposeful growth of the denomination.

A large number of research has been conducted to better understand what motivates and hinders the active engagement of young adult church members, along with suggested strategies that will increase motivation and participation (Horan, 2017; Jenkin & Martin, 2014; Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011; Lewis Center for Church Leadership, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2007, 2014, 2015; Stanton, 2012; Twenge, 2016; Van der Merwe, Grobler, Strasheim, & Orton, 2013). Even though there have been many studies conducted on young adults and the church, most have not been focused on specifically the young adults of the SMC. Even though the SMC was founded by African Americans in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the denomination has grown to encompass various races and nationalities from 39 countries on five continents throughout the world

(AME7.org, 2017). However, this study focused mainly on the African American young adult population in relation to their engagement in the church. The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) contains data from several religious scholars and researchers around the world. In 2001, a congregational life Study was conducted on the racial-ethnic/multicultural population of the Presbyterian Church and archived in ARDA. This 2001 study included a similar focus on African American young adults in church engagement. It focused on research that has yielded factors for the decline in the active engagement of young adult in the church, and suggested strategies to increase this active engagement.

According to Taylor, Chatters, and Brown (2014), more recent studies on religious participation among African Americans have grown significantly. Yet, compared to non-Hispanic whites, there is still a lack of research in this area. Since the 1930s, the first major field study about the Black church from the African American experiences was conducted. The 10-year study, conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya (2003), was based on the seven major historic Black denominations: the “AME Church; African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC); National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and Church of God in Christ (COGIC)” (p. 1). The study provided responses from church pastors or clergy on why they believe young adults are leaving the church.

Understanding the young adult population: Who are they? The focus of the SMC, based on findings from the strategic planning team presented in Chapter 1, is the young adults age 21–39, an age range that encompasses two generational cohorts—Generation X and millennials. The Pew Research Center designated Generations Xers as those born between 1965 and 1980 (currently 54–39 years old), and millennials as those born between 1981 and 1997 (currently 38–22 years old). The present study focused on these two generational groups, who at the time of the

2001 data set were 21–39. The focus of most recent research on church involvement has been on millennials and their attitude toward religion and involvement in the church. Since the focus group of this study includes Generation X and millennials/Generation Y, understanding the characteristics and attitudes of both cohorts is important. Despite their closeness in age, they surprisingly differ in their attitudes and behavior towards religion. The attitudes and behaviors developed as a youth or teen can highly influence a person’s adulthood decisions and attitudes, even their religious engagement. Reasons these young adults disengage themselves from the church may be different and based on different factors, attitudes, and beliefs from their earlier experiences.

In a cross-sectional comparison of generational cohorts, spirituality, and religiosity by Gay and Lynxwiler (2013), millennials had the lowest attendance level and were followed by Generation X as the next lowest level. Generation X claimed to be “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR)—a group title created by Barna (2017, para 2). In the busyness of their life, they have formed families and established their place in the labor force. Results showed that even though they are more likely to be more SBNR than millennials, they are like the millennials in the frequency of their prayer life and attendance at religious services. Therefore, there should be some concern with religious organizations. A Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014) revealed a decline from 2007 to 2014 in high and medium religious commitment for Generation X and millennial populations. The study showed an increase in low religious commitment for both generations. According to Pew Research Center (2014), data were analyzed by looking at four measurements of religious observances: “self-assessment of religion’s importance, religious attendance, frequency of prayer, and belief in God” (para. 36). For each of the measures, the researcher assigned each respondent with a score of 1 for high religious observance, a score of 0 for medium religious observance, and a score of -1 for low religious

observance. Religious observances were based on attendance at religious services, prayer life frequency, and belief in God. Respondents with an overall score of 2 or higher were categorized as “high,” meaning “highly religious,” those who score between -1 and 1 were categorized as “medium,” and those scoring -2 and below were categorized as “low” on the scale. Based on the study, Generation X is somewhat difficult to categorize in terms of religious belief. Even though they self-classify as being spiritual but not religious (Gay & Lynxwiler, 2013), 75% of Generation Xers stated religion is highly important to their lives (Bengston et al., 2013).

According to Chase (2016), Bengston et al. (2013) stated Generation Xs “feel that they are independent thinkers such that they are willing to take breaks from religion in order to negotiate difficult doctrinal challenges” (p. 14). Leaving the church has been linked to their personal beliefs and values. They take a break or leave permanently because they find it to be a conflict with their own beliefs. Tradition and culture alone are not enough to keep them as members (Niemelä, 2015). Church leaders must reach out to their Generation X believers and establish practices that will encourage them to strengthen their faith and active engagement in religious practices, so their secular counterparts, who also believe that they are independent thinkers, will not easily persuade them. Generation X secular counterparts are skeptical of believers and supernatural faith, increasingly hostile of religious views, and view religion as illogical and not useful to society (Bengston et al., 2013).

During the millennial age, young adults are bombarded with numerous possibilities for their lives. Arnett (2007) refers to this period as the age of identity explorations. During this period, young adults begin to analyze their values and religious beliefs, reexamine their religious attitudes, behaviors, and preferences, and lessen their frequency of church attendance (Koenig, McGue, & Iacono, 2008). Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) stated that young adults now become overwhelmed with their numerous responsibilities, leaving religious participation no

longer as important. During this early adulthood period, young adults are bombarded with the pressures of life, lessening their participation and engagement in church. However, Van der Merwe et al. (2013) stated that during the middle adulthood, participation and engagement gradually begin to increase and remains stable as young adults begin to settle down.

David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, is the author of *You Lost Me*, a sequel to the book, *unChristian*. While *unChristian* focused on the reasons young non-Christians reject the church, *You Lost Me* examined the reasons young people who grew up in the church decided to leave. The data used in both of Kinnaman's books represent a compilation of interviews from more than 27 years. For the book, *You Lost Me*, the researchers with the Barna Group interviewed 5,000 new young adults ages 18 to 29. These interviews asked them to describe their church experiences, their faith, and the factors that have led to their rejection of the church, as well as, what connections with the church remain. According to Kinnaman, church leaders cannot effectively help millennials in their spiritual development without understanding three primary categories of which they have been divided based on how they have described their experiences with the church—nomads, prodigals, and exiles (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Nomads are Christian young adults who have left the church, and no longer active. They declare their affinity for Jesus but have lost their love for the church. Forty-three percent believe that church attendance and having Christian friends is not a necessity. Twenty-five percent of them say faith and religion is no longer as important to them. Additionally, 23% of them said they began to feel no sense of belonging (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Prodigals were raised as Christians in their younger years. However, they have lost their faith. They became disillusioned by the church and are determined to never return; Christianity no longer satisfies their desires. About 21% of these millennials said, "Christian beliefs do not make sense to them" (p. 240). Approximately 20% of them said they "had a negative experience in

church or with Christians” (p. 240). Subsequently, 19% of them say Christianity no longer met their spiritual needs (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Exiles want to maintain their faith but stay connected to the world (society). Almost four out of 10 millennials (38%) say they want to connect with Jesus, but in the world, they live in. One-third (33%) of them say they would rather connect with the God they see working more outside of the church, as oppose to working in the church. Another 32% say they want to be a Christian, but do not want to separate from the world around them (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Millennials followed traditional trends that were followed by Generation X, but with some significant differences. The biggest difference was the increase in “nones” or those who claim to be an atheists or nonbeliever, not identify with any religion (Lipka, 2015). According to data collected from the nationally representative General Social Survey between 2006 to 2014, a strikingly dwindling number of Americans between the ages of 18 to 29 participated in religious activities or supported any religious beliefs (Twenge, 2016). Compared to the generational cohorts before them, millennials had the highest percentage of nones, religiously non-affiliated members (Lipka, 2015). According to the 2015 Religious Landscape Report from the Pew Research Center (Lipka, 2015) about 36% of millennials claimed no specific religious faith, while roughly 55% of them claimed Christianity. Most nones claimed to be spiritual but not religious (SBNR).

Millennials claim not be religious if it is based on their association with a specific tradition or congregation. For Generation X, 70% claimed to be Christian, but only 23% claimed no religious affiliation (Lipka, 2015). A large percentage of millennials are nonreligious, while some were raised without a solid religious background—making them “nones” from childhood (Sherkat, 2014). Rainer and Rainer (2011) stated that even though the Christian millennial population is no higher than 15%, “these young people may well turn the world upside down with their

commitments and causes” (p. 255). Thus, they will connect with churches that are more concerned with the needs of the community and the nation.

Twenge (2016) stated, conservatives and Black protestants do not follow the trend—they tend to retain more of their members, unlike their counterparts. According to Smith (2009), in comparison to mainline denominations, both conservatives and Black protestants have experienced great losses of their millennial young adults. Millennials are leaving at a rate of 3% compared to only 0.5% in the mainline denominations. With this continued loss of the young adult population, church leaders must find ways to sustain this critical age group.

What is important about motivation and engagement? According to Maslow (Maslow’s theory of human motivation) and Alderfer (ERG theory of motivation), the needs of individuals serve as a driving force in their behavior (sources). Whenever people feel a need, they will do whatever they can to meet that need. When enough people feel the need for a change, a group of people will join together to try something new to find a solution. Many young adults are leaving the church or becoming inactive due to needs or drives not being met. The church has formed a market to find a solution to this phenomenon. The church is full of people who have wants, desires, and needs of their own.

Businesses, like many churches, are actively trying to understand how to close the engagement gap between members of different age groups. Gebauer, Lowman, and Gordon (2008) explained engagement as “the deep and broad connection that members have with an organization to make them go above and beyond what is expected to make the organization successful” (p. 9). This connection, they explained, is broken down into three parts: the rational (head), the emotional (heart), and the motivation (hands). Members of an organization must understand what to do to help the organization succeed (the rationale), feel the emotional connection to the organization and its leaders (the emotion), and be willing to put their knowledge

and emotion into action to improve the performance of the organization as well as their own (the motivation). Having only one or two of these connections is not enough to create true engagement. Like the four drives of motivation identified by Lawrence and Nohria (2002), Gebauer et al. (2008) identified five actions organizations must utilize to close the engagement gap and move members from being enrolled and/or disenchanted to being engaged; that is to "know them, grow them, inspire them, involve them, and reward them" (p. 17). These actions and drives are increasingly important for organizations to have an impact on the young adult population.

The drive to acquire and achieve. Young adults have become less actively engaged in the life of the church and become church dropouts due to the distraction from pressures and work responsibilities, and their abundant choices for leisure and social activities. Adding achieve makes clear that this drive also focuses on recognition and status, and not just things. Young adults are very self-focused but in a positive connotation. They are focused on their careers, their peer groups, their relationships, and their communities. They often must prioritize around the various overwhelming tasks of their day-to-day life. They feel pressured to perform and reach their greatest achievements in all they do with work, volunteer activities, school activities, sports, grades, and more (Becton, Walker, & Farmer, 2014).

Millennials are achievement-oriented, and desire long-term success (Pew Research Center, 2007). They appreciate feedback and guidance, want to be kept in the loop, and need reassurance and frequent praise for what they do. Since millennials are results-driven, they expect their work to bring achievement for themselves, the cause, and the organization (Feldmann et al., 2013). Gen-Xers are motivated by their contributions to the success of the organization. Thus, they crave positive reinforcement and seek validation for their value to the organization. According to Feldmann (2013), Gen-Xers who lack feedback will seek opportunities outside of the organization.

Nevertheless, young adults of Gen X and millennials generations appreciate the opportunity to participate in purposeful, service projects that are community and goal oriented. Millennials grew up providing services and volunteer opportunities. However, they have grown skeptical of institutions, even the church. They are eager to donate their time and money to a cause where they can make a difference. Churches and other nonprofit organizations must be honest about their purpose, their mission, and how their funds will benefit the cause. Building trust and a positive attitude towards the organization would be more effective in gaining young adult support and engagement (Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

The drive to bond and belong. If churches want to motivate young adults, they must understand that the one thing that motivates them is establishing relationships (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Many studies have focused on the attendance and involvement patterns of young adults. However, not many have focused on retention factors (Brown, 2016). Many young adults have expressed their concerns about feeling uncomfortable in the church. Understandably, they would choose to spend their time elsewhere—where they feel comfortable, safe, and a sense of belonging. If church leaders fail to grasp that reality, they have failed to understand the millennials. Fifty-nine percent of young adults who are actively engaged in the church have a close friend at the church; and 28% have established a relationship with an adult other than the pastor or a church staff member (Barna Group, 2013a). Teens and young adults are leaving the church and reporting fewer meaningful relationships. This lack of effective adult or parent intervention has led to fewer opportunities for millennials to gain spiritual supporting (Horan, 2017). Millennials want mentoring and coaching relationships. Horan (2017) stated, “Millennials are relational, want mentors who understand their doubts and concerns, and respect older generations and intergenerational relationships, which suggests a higher probability of mentoring success” (p. 70).

A 2013 qualitative study exploring the church involvement of emerging adults, found a strong impact of relational influences on young adult's decision to continue church engagement (Brown, 2016). Church leaders will play a big role in establishing relationships with the young adult generation. Young adults want to follow church leaders who are real and can confess their struggles and admit their failures. They are looking for churches and church leaders who will “demonstrate transparency, humility, and integrity” (Rainer & Rainer, 2011, p. 268). Thus, “the drive to bond is fulfilled when an organization promotes teamwork, collaboration, openness, and friendship” (Lee & Raschke, 2016, p. 165).

Based on research findings, young adults expressed the significant impact having intergenerational mentoring relationships have had on their decision to remain involved in the church. These intergenerational relationships created not only a sense of belonging to a church body, but allowed young adults to feel safe, care, and a family feel (Brown, 2016). Churches should be multigenerational with intentional opportunities for young adults to establish relationships with other generations. This may include serving alongside persons from their grandparents' generation or spending time in the nursery or children's church. As young people grow in relationships with trustworthy, caring adults, they will be more open to engaging the broader church community (Smith, 2017). Young adults expressed the importance of getting involved in ministry and leadership opportunities and finding a group of people or ministry to connect with to feel a sense of belonging (Brown, 2016).

The concept of belonging was added to the drive to bond to emphasize that bonding is more than just having a close bond or one-on-one relationship with another person, but also the desire to be a part of a group or team. Human beings want to fit in or to be included. A national research study of effective ministry models (Siebert Foundation, 2015) was conducted to study how to engage millennials in ministry. The qualitative research project identified six key insights

that helped the researchers form an understanding of millennial behaviors and religious preferences and engagement. The third insight stated:

Traditional membership models are meaningless to millennials, who deeply desire to belong, but resist institutional membership and instead seek out relational belonging. They prefer to associate with ‘tribes’ where they feel welcomed and accepted for who they are. They look for active involvement and opportunities to make a real difference. (Siebert Foundation, 2015, p. 5)

Millennials seek engagement where they can not only make an impact but be impacted in return (Feldmann et al., 2013). Therefore, organizations should engage millennials with a cause that is meaningful to them and will bring personal satisfaction. Church leaders must make every effort to integrate more young adults in the ministries of the church to increase motivation and participation. Young adults want to be needed where they can do something significant; not just be entertained. So, it is understandable that according to Shaw and Constantineanu (2016), young adults will develop their lasting Christian faith when they are given the opportunity to use their gifts and talents in leadership roles for a meaningful cause.

Many churches have left engagement of young people in the church to the church’s youth workers, rather than to the desegregated population of the church. The Barna Group (2013a) found that 45% of young adults actively engaged in the church want to learn how their gifts and passions are a part of God’s calling. Young Adults admitted to having the desire to serve and to be engaged in church ministries, but they are uncertain how or where they fit (Nestor, 1993). Nestor’s study has led to the central fact many church members have unknown and undeveloped gifts, spiritual and unspiritual, to help make the church a unified unit ministering to the needs of all people; and fulfilling the spiritual mandate of Christ. As laypersons gain a better understanding of spiritual

gifts and how the gifts function in the church, they will increase engagement in church ministries (Nestor, 1993; Stark, 2016).

To increase active engagement in ministry at Ketchum United Methodist Church in Ketchum, Oklahoma, a program was developed to teach about the movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers who have a responsibility to utilize their spiritual gifts in ministry (Nestor, 1993). The program included training sessions in the form of a retreat. The 2-day training sessions included presentations, discussions, hand-outs, a spiritual gifts inventory, and small group interaction. Twenty-eight members of the church attended the training program. Those who participated expressed an increased understanding of spiritual gifts and responsibilities in ministry. The results showed an increase in active engagement as well as a willingness to become more involved at a future time. At the end of the training session and the follow-up, the number of participants who recognized their spiritual gifts and their personal responsibility to be active in ministry increased. This demonstrated that there were increased numbers of people who were willing to be obedient to God's Word and become active in outreach and ministry. There was a genuine interest in identifying spiritual gifts with the stated intent of using them to become more effective in personal ministry (Nestor, 1993, p. 110). This may imply that young adults may feel a sense of belonging and be more willing to actively engage in the life of the church once they understand how the gifts and working of the Holy Spirit fit into the church's ministry and in themselves.

The drive to be challenged and comprehend. The drive to comprehend refers to the desire to learn and understand the outside world and one's inner self. According to Lawrence and Nohria (2002), humans are born with the drive to satisfy our curiosity and understand the world around us. The researchers discussed extensively the innate curiosity and drive to learn—to explore new areas of life, to practice new skills, and to ultimately satisfy one's curiosity. Nestor

(1993) suggested gaining a better understanding of spiritual gifts and how they function in the church will increase engagement in church ministries. As young adults learn more about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they also learn more about themselves, as a functioning member of the church. Once they find their spiritual gifts and determine how to use those spiritual gifts in the various ministries of the church, they will gain a better understanding of what is expected, understand the role they play in the ministry of the church, and see a connection with the ministry and their life and needs.

The drive to comprehend included the drive to overcome challenges. Humans are innately driven to tackle challenges, no matter how minute or great the challenge. People are motivated to engage when they are challenged and enabled to “grow, learn, innovate and contribute to their organization and their society” (Lee & Raschke, 2016, p. 165). Today, young adults are faced with multiple challenges. Unfortunately, unexpected difficulties can derail even the most successful young adult. They are bombarded with many challenges and concerns. Based on Rainer and Rainer (2011), the top 10 areas of concern and importance to young adults, especially the millennial generation, are (in order of importance) “family, friends, education, career/job, spouse/partner, spiritual matters, finances, happiness, raising kids, and health” (p. 229). Many young adults seek help from others such as mentors and the church to help them understand, deal with, and overcome these challenges. Based on interviews and surveys of Adventist millennial, young adults expressed the concern that many older adults look at their specific sins and struggles and assigned a judgment of their heart or intentions. However, these young adults believed that this was God’s way of drawing them closer to Him. Young adults want to establish relationships based on forgiveness and acceptance, with the understanding that in time, God will bring the necessary change (Jenkin & Martin, 2014).

Christian Smith (Schweitzer, 2014) described the spiritual and religious life of young teens as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD). They [young teens] believe being a good and moral person is essential to having a happy and fulfilling life, and religion provides therapeutic benefits by “making people feel good, helping people with pain and fear, and giving them the tools to deal with life’s traumas” (Richardson, 2013). However, they believe that God does not particularly need to be involved in a person’s life unless it is to solve a problem. Therefore, this belief restricts their engagement in the life of the church and the possible connections they could form.

Because of the cultural difference between the generation x and millennial population today compared to those of previous generations, the church is no longer filled with the typical, usual young adults. Today, churches must be prepared to deal with the new normal—an unmarried, single-parent generation with many issues and concerns. Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) suggested that churches are not equipped to deal with this new normal. Young adults deal with the challenges of their life events (i.e., education, marriage, job, and children) being either deferred, occurring outside of the normal order, and sometimes never occurring. The world for young adults is changing in significant ways that eventually lead to challenges in their Christianity and the Bible.

The drive to defend and define. The fourth drive identifies that people defend themselves, their loved ones, their beliefs and the things they have worked hard for. Humans will defend those things they hold dear. This drive is more about purpose and passion. This drive is ignited whenever people feel that views and self-images are threatened. Humans respond to this defense though unfavorable and even violent manners. However, Lawrence and Nohria (2002) noted people are not innately driven to be aggressive, which is a defensive mechanism. As humans are driven to defend what is important to them, defining exactly how they feel so that others will understand what and why they are defending is important. Thus, the last drive, to

defend also includes the drive to define. Young adults insist on defining their purpose and having a defined purpose in all they choose to engage in. Consequently, one become defensive when they feel what defines them, or what they believe in or is a part of, is being questioned or threatened.

Rainer and Rainer (2011) propose that pastors and churches connect and reach young adults by “willingly selling out for the sake of the gospel” (p. 255). They explained that young adults see what most churches do as a waste of time, not relevant, and thus, they do not want to be a part of it. Like the church’s challenges of maintaining young adult engagement, the workplace also finds this generation hard to keep engaged (Schullery, 2013). This generation is unwilling to give wholehearted effort to anything they feel is meaningless, whether in the workplace or the church. Engaging young adults in meaningful activities is critical to avoiding an increased turnover in the workplace and the church (Schullery, 2013).

If a church desires to connect and incorporate the young adults, they must challenge the young adults to show their Christianity through their lives as they connect daily with those around them. For young adults, just attending church does not equal faithfulness. The older generations tend to make church engagement and attendance a priority, while the younger generation want to ensure the activity is purposeful before they engage in the activity. Young adults, “want to learn, to be challenged, and to understand the relationship between their work and the overall mission of the organization” (Tulgan, 2009, p. 13). They must see the church as being a meaningful and relevant. There must be a defined purpose. The drive to defend and define is about establishing purpose and passion for engaging in work, activities, and even church ministries. Passion allows focus and extreme dedication to engaging in the task at hand.

Rainer and Rainer (2011) explained that the church is confronted with two challenges when dealing with the dominant generation, millennials. Millennials believe the church is too focused on their own needs, rather than the needs of the community. Christian millennials do not seek

change for change sake, but change must be purposeful. Two buzzwords used by Christian millennials, as noted by Rainer and Rainer (2011), are *missional* and *incarnational*. Christian millennials believe the church should be missional, that is, the church is sent into the community to demonstrate the love of Christ. They also believe churches should be incarnational, present and in flesh in the community (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Rainer and Rainer (2011) also stated that millennials reject churches that see the community as a way of increasing their church's attendance and finances. They are more attracted to a church that focuses on delving deeper and learning the scripture.

Young adults choose to become less actively engaged, and sometimes leave the church because they believe that the church is too controlling and not equipped to deal with real-life issues. Many young adults feel that church is not connected to or aware of how to deal with today's culture (Horan, 2017). They leave because they feel the church is not coherent with their beliefs. Tradition and culture alone are not enough to keep them as members. The values of young adults, especially those classified as millennials, are different from those of previous generations. Their life choices and lifestyles are different, to include their religious life.

Waters and Bortree (2012) associated the lack of engagement and disconnect with the church from the young adults' perception of how they believe the contemporary church treats cultural differences. Some young adults have experienced a shift in social values. They are more tolerant to nontraditional beliefs and values, such as homosexuality and same-sex marriage, evolution, abortion, and divorce, which are not easily accepted or understood by traditional Christians (Farrell, 2011). Many of the contemporary values of today's young adult generation are typically frowned upon in a religious setting, causing them to disconnect themselves from the affiliation of the church, and reduce church attendance and engagement. In a study conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya (2003), 25% of the clergy felt that the primary reason for this disengagement

was due to young people being either bored and or the church lacking relevant programs for them. Twenty-two percent stated some young adults felt they were not given opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. Almost 15% of the pastors felt that young people in late adolescence and young adulthood stage of life were going through a period of independence and needed to “search and test things out for themselves” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2003, p. 327). Between 30 and 40 years of age, or during a time of trouble, these young adults returned to the church and became active. Smith (2009) explored the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults, ages 18 to 24, in the United States. Based on interviews with covering over a five-year period, Smith (2009) revealed how the religious practices of the teenagers studied in *Soul Searching* changed as they grew into adulthood, which may account for their return to active engagement in the church.

Five percent of clergy noted reasons, such as “lack of intellectual challenge,” or “hypocrisy in the church,” or “outgrowing one’s childhood faith and beliefs” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 327). Despite this low percentage, a more recent study by Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011) discovered some young adults have become less active in the church, classify Christians as phony, and view the church as boring. Some young adults are detrimentally affected by things they have heard about relating to corruption in the church (Waters & Bortree, 2012). Many young adults prefer “a flexible belief system that draws from religion but is not entirely dictated by it” (Bengtson, Putney, & Harris, 2013, p. 17). Young adults who are active in the church feel a deeper connection or sense of intimacy to God (Barna Group, 2013a). Sixty-five percent of young adults in the church feel the Bible contains wisdom that would lead them into purposeful life, and 68% believe Jesus personally speaks to them. On the other hand, many view the religious institution and practices as irrelevant in their life (Sandfort & Haworth, 2002).

Facilitating Lasting and Active Engagement. Barna Group (2013a) identified four multifaceted efforts that have encouraged and increased active, continuous engagement of young

adults in the church. The four multifaceted efforts to engaging young adults can be connected to the four drive theory in motivating them. Based on the study conducted by the Barna Group (2013a), the relationship of these concepts and experiences of active young adults are like young adults who have left the church, in relation to these efforts and drives (see Table 1).

Table 1

Four Multifaceted Efforts Connected to the Four Drive Theory of Motivation

Four drive theory of motivation	The four multifaceted efforts to engagement	Active young adults	Dropout young adults
Drive to acquire and achieve	Using their gifts and skills to work for the local church in the present—not future—tense		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned to view their gifts and passions as part of God’s calling 	45%	17%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found a cause or issue at church that motivated them 	24%	10%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Served the poor through their church 	33%	14%
Drive to bond and belong	Establishing a meaningful relationship		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had a close friend who was an adult or minister 	59%	31%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had a mentor - an adult/minister 	28%	11%
Drive to comprehend and to be challenged	Developing discernment skills — especially in understanding and interpreting today’s culture		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned about how Christians can positively contribute to society 	46%	20%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understood their purpose in life through church 	45%	12%
Drive to defend and define	Establishing a deeper connection or sense of intimacy with God		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates with God in a personal and relevant way 	68%	25%

Table 1 (Continued)

Four drive theory of motivation	The four multifaceted efforts to engagement	Active young adults	Dropout young adults
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believes the Bible contains everything needed to live a meaningful life. 	65%	17%

Note. Barna Group data from *You Lost Me* research. $N = 1,296$

Frye (2014) described a study conducted in England by Beth Keith who sought to examine practices among churches who have experienced an increase in their young adult population.

Based on the study, key values found to be successful with young adults were community and family, trust, openness, spirituality, and change. These common key values hold similarity to the four drives of motivation, as well as the four multifaceted efforts to engage young adults described in the previous section. Frye (2014) reiterated that young adults seek to belong first and to believe later. Trust, the second common key value, is also vital to the young adult population.

Spirituality, which emphasizes the search for meaning, is another common key value. Like the drive to define and defend, spirituality establishes a deeper connection or sense of intimacy with God.

Suggested strategies to attract young adults. In the study conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya (2003), when clergy were asked, “What special techniques and programs have you found to be successful in attracting young people?,” the following were given as responses: 19.2% stated the music and choir; 13.2% said greater participation and involvement in the leadership and decision making of the church; 12.1% chose athletic and recreational programs (such as social events or picnics); 8.7% said evangelism and outreach programs; 6.9% advocated Bible study and educational programs; 6.2% saw the need for more understanding and tolerance for young people’s life-styles (openness and encouragement); 3.7% said relevant preaching; and < 1% said community service programs. This study by Lincoln and Mamiya (2003) provided useful suggestions that

church leaders can implement in worship services or improve upon if already established. These suggested programs and techniques may provide the key church leaders need to increase attendance and engagement of the missing young adult population.

Review of Methodological Issues

This section reviewed a number of methodological approaches that were discovered in the literature supporting this study. This section discussed specifically the four multifaceted efforts to engagement identified by Barna Group and the methodology used by various researchers who studied these four efforts in relation to young adult engagement in the church. The section focused specifically on establishing a meaningful relationship, developing discernment skills, using gifts and skills, and establishing a deeper connection and intimacy with God. The methodological approaches used in these studies assisted the researcher in determining best approaches to use in this study, which focused on similar aspects of increasing engagement in the church.

Establishing a meaningful relationship. Kaiser (2015) identified a longitudinal study conducted by Black (2006) called the Faith Journey of Young Adults (FJYA). Black interviewed 1,362 young adults using a group setting and individual questionnaires. The participants were active, engaged young adults, as well as those who disassociated with a local church. The purpose of the study was to better understand the factors that led to young adults attending or leaving the church. The hope was to develop practical insight for parents and church leaders. The study included two parts. Part One was quantitative and surveyed the 1,362 participants. Part two involved small group interviews with 270 participants. The surveys were conducted at churches and through college campus ministries. Based on both parts of the study, relationships and mentoring are reasons why young adults continued to be active in the church. Those who were inactive in the church claimed the church had lost appeal and value because of people they believed were fake Christians, lack of friendships, and bad experiences.

These key factors described by Black had a powerful effect on the active engagement of young adults (as cited in Kaiser, 2015). The underlying assumption was that spirituality and active engagement are interrelated. “Spiritual maturity fosters a greater engagement with the church, which leads to a deeper level of Christian maturity and the cycle continues to feed itself” (Kaiser, 2015, p. 47). For early young adults (in their 20s), Black suggested increasing the scope of ministry to emphasize “discipleship, relationships, mentoring and allowing students meaningful involvement” (Kaiser, 2015, p. 47). He also encouraged “young adult ministries to create accepting environments, provide legitimate and meaningful opportunities for involvement, and intergenerational opportunities for young adults to interact with older adults in a variety of settings” (Kaiser, 2015, p. 48).

Developing discernment skills—especially in understanding and interpreting today’s culture. The major challenge churches face in ministering to young people is centered on culture. Many congregations recognize a gap between what they offer and what young people need in their complex culture. Relevance and conforming to popular cultural norms were reported as obstacles by 36% of pastors in a survey conducted on determining what young people need versus what most churches provide (Fuller Youth Institute, 2014). Survey participants were asked, using a Likert scale (ranging from one to five with five being the highest), to rate the statement, “my church teaches people how to interact with cultural and societal issues.” This statement was rated the second lowest average of 3.71 out of 5 (p. 9). When pastoral leaders of churches that have effectively engaged young adults were surveyed, 33% reported that their success could be accredited to their inclusive and open attitude toward other people and the overall culture. Despite maintaining a consistent and firm theological conviction, these churches also maintained a sense of grace and generosity for different opinions. This attitude created a welcoming spirit for young

adults to participate in theological and scriptural discussions despite having a differing opinion of others.

Using their gifts and skills to work for the local church in the present—not future—tense. Church members have admitted to having the desire to serve and to be engaged in church ministries, yet they are uncertain how or where they fit (Nestor, 1993). Nestor (1993) surmised, as the understanding of spiritual gifts and how they function in the church increases, there would be an increase in engagement in church ministries. The future of the Church is dependent upon the development of young adults whose faith life is nurtured by an understanding of the church's mission and their role in that mission. Nestor (1993) implemented qualitative and quantitative methods to study his hypothesis. The researcher organized training sessions (sharing and small group discussions), as well as a program evaluation (survey and questionnaire), and pretests and posttests to measure an increase in attitude and involvement. Twenty-eight men and women of various ages, long-term and new members, church leaders, and varied theological backgrounds participated in the study. After the training, 18 realized the necessity of identifying their spiritual gift, and 12 credited ministry engagements on understanding their spiritual gifts. There were positive responses to the training and an increase in ministry engagement.

Establishing a deeper connection or sense of intimacy with God. Connecting members to ministry that not only fits their lives, but also meets the mandates of the gospel, and meets their spiritual needs are important. Thumma and Bird (2011) used a Hartford Institute Parish Inventory to survey 7,299 church members. The inventory identified the top two pathways to help increase involvement: “helping members deepen their personal and spiritual relationship with God (12%),” and “helping members discover their own gifts for ministry and service (10%)” (p. 19). Based on the results, 57% increased their engagement because they accepted an office or responsibility.

Establishing a deeper connection or relationship with God will increase one's desire and dedication to actively engage in ministry or the life of the church.

Synthesis of Research Findings

The research findings noted young adults want to be actively involved in the ministries of the church, but gaps exist in what they want and need, and what they are finding. The research findings revealed a need to deepen the personal and spiritual foundations of the young adults of the 21st century. They have several personal and spiritual needs:

- to establish real, trusting, and lasting relationships with others in the church,
- to understand their purpose and spiritual gifts and to utilize them in the church, and
- to understand how to operate in this complex culture, while fulfilling their personal and spiritual needs.

The research findings solidified the fact that churches must make an intentional effort to understand the culture of the young adults they serve, understand their reasons for inactivity in church ministries or for leaving the church, and find strategies and best practices that will not only increase their engagement but sustain their engagement in the life of the church's ministries. The SMC must be intentional in following their mission, "to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people," especially the young adults, the future to the continued growth of ministry (as noted in denomination's website, 2017, para.1).

Critique of Previous Research

Determining how to increase the active engagement of the young adults of the church is of great importance to many churches based on the abundance of research on this topic. Many people have opinions about why young adults are leaving the church. It is a controversial topic that Barna Group has been researching for more than a decade through more than 27,140 interviews and 200 studies (2013a). Research has been conducted on this issue in many religious denominations of

varied demographics, in and outside of the United States of America. Many studies have found common factors that have affected the active engagement of the young adult population.

Evaluating the previous research is important to the church and other organizations. Gaining a better understanding of the factors that have affected active engagement may help in discovering the best strategies that work for this study's specific area of interest—SMC young adults (age 21–39) in South Carolina. One weakness of previous research is a lack of data on the specific population and denomination. Some research was based on multiple denominations, but none specifically on the desired denomination of this study (Nestor, 1993; Simmons, 2015; Thumma and Bird, 2011).

Chapter 2 Summary

The lack of active engagement of young adults in church ministries is not a new phenomenon. There has been an urgency to determine what strategies could motivate and increase the participation and engagement of young adult church members. The presence and engagement of young adults, ages 21–39, is vital to the success and continuation of ministries for many, if not all, churches. This is not only important to the SMC in South Carolina, which is the focus of this study, but too many denominations and organizations around the world.

Much research has been done on this issue. Until a clear understanding of why there is a decline in young adult engagement, and best practices to increase and sustain engagement are discovered, this phenomenon will continue to plague churches. A study by the Barna Group (2013a) suggested four multifaceted efforts that have promoted a lasting, active engagement of young adults in the church:

1. Establishing a meaningful relationship
2. Understanding today's culture
3. Using their gifts and skills in the church

4. Establishing a deeper connection or sense of intimacy with God

The implementation of these efforts is related to the four drives theory to motivation by Lawrence and Nohria (2002). The four drives theory is based on research that shows four underlying drives to increase employee engagement and motivation: “acquire and achieve, bond and belong, challenge and comprehend, and define and defend” (Nelson, 2017, para. 2). Each of the four drives of motivation is independent of one another. According to Lee and Raschkeb (2016), as church leaders seek ways to motivate, engage, and sustain the young adult population of the church, they should remember that the drive to bond is connected to commitment, and the drive to comprehend is connected to engagement. However, the four drive together can best improve motivation (Lee & Raschkeb, 2016). Through the implementation of these efforts, young adult church members will ultimately find their place in the various ministries of the church and understand the importance of their role and active engagement in the ministry of the church.

Chapter 3: Methodology

There is a growing amount of research about the disengagement of the young adult population in the church. Research by the Fuller Youth Institute (2014) found church leaders agreed that “the faith attrition of young people isn’t merely a youth ministry problem—it is a systemic church problem” (p. 2). Like other denominations, there is an increasing disengagement with young adults of the SMC. The young adult council is specifically focused on engaging young adults in the age group of 21–39. I am specifically interested in the phenomenon in the African American community. Studies of religion and religious activity on African Americans are limited and have focused on the SMC and a few other denominations or an ethnic subset of a denomination. Consequently, data on African American religious activity in this study is a combination of available data on African Americans and is supported in parallel with the historically, copious literature available on the SMC.

It is not known what factors have affected the active engagement of church members age 21–39 in SMC church ministries. The purposes of this descriptive study were to examine factors that affect active engagement in the life of church members in that age group and to determine whether the drive to bond and belong of the four drive theory of motivation is related to this lack of active engagement. With the mission statement of the SMC being to minister to the intellectual (mind), physical (body), and spiritual (spirit) needs of the member of the SMC, the goal was to understand more fully what factors may lead to increased engagement (Denominational literature source, 2017). The first step to understanding what may motivate and increase active engagement is understanding what factors have led to the lack of engagement.

Lewis Center for Church Leadership (2014) suggested that strong, growing congregations typically have a high percentage of members who are actively involved in learning, serving, and leading. Unfortunately, a large group of the less-active church members is mainly members age

21–39. For about a decade (2004–2013), Barna Group’s researchers examined the faith development of young adults in the church (Barna Group, 2013a). After 27,140 interviews from more than 200 studies, research showed nearly six in 10 (59%) of these young people who grew up in Christian churches ended up leaving their faith within the first decade of adult life. During that time period, the unchurched segment, among members of the young adult age group, increased from 44% to 52% (Barna Group, 2013a). About one-fourth of them were practicing Christians.

There is an urgency for the church to address the realities faced by today’s Black youth and young adults. It is more than simply the need to be agents of hope. The church must be intentional and willing to reach this population (Wimberly, 2016). Active engagement includes consistent attendance and participation in church programs, ministries, and auxiliaries. According to Merriam-Webster (2017), engagement is an emotional involvement or commitment. The term *engagement* allows for a greater sense of commitment of service as described by the mission of the SMC: “to minister to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people” (Denominational literature source, 2017, p. 23). Therefore, the term engagement was used throughout this study, as opposed to the term *participation*.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this descriptive research study was to examine whether the fulfillment of feeling a bond and sense of belonging is associated with the active engagement of young adults in church ministries. Young adults are more motivated to increase their engagement in church ministries when they feel that they have established bonding relationships within their congregation and feel a sense of belonging or purpose in the ministries of their respective place of worship (Shafi et al., 2015). The researcher examined factors that affect the active engagement of young adults in organizations.

Research Question

The current study utilized quantitative data from an existing data set and qualitative data using semi structured interviews. Both parts of the data collection contributed to the descriptive data analyzed to answer the following research question:

What relationship exists among young African American adults between their sense of belonging in a church and level of engagement in church ministries?

Descriptive Research Design

Descriptive research designs can provide a “quick snapshot of the prevalence of a phenomenon” (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). Descriptive research also provides answers associated with a research problem (USCLibraries, 2019)—in this study, the decrease in engagement of young adults age 21–39 in the ministries and life of the local churches. According to the USCLibraries (2019),

a descriptive study cannot conclusively ascertain answers to research questions that are seeking to understand “why” a phenomenon occurs. Descriptive research is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to describe “what exists” with respect to variables or conditions in a situation (para. 23).

This study focused on several variables associated with the phenomenon to determine their association with the sense of belonging and its effect on active engagement of young adults in the life of the church. Descriptive research can be a precursor to additional quantitative research by providing valuable information as to what variables are worth testing quantitatively. Descriptive design can be used to collect a large amount of data for detailed analysis; thus, yielding rich data that can lead to future studies based on implications and recommendations (USCLibraries, 2019)

Descriptive research is appropriate to use when considering if there are patterns and commonality in attitudes and behaviors between different populations (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

This study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. One type of descriptive research is survey research, which involves asking questions of a sample of individuals who are representative of the group or groups being studied. Such methodology may have a variety of purposes such as describing, comparing, and correlating. Comparisons were made between young adults from a 2001 congregational life survey for quantitative data and 2018 interviews of a sample of SMC young adults for qualitative data collection. Therefore, descriptive research is an appropriate method to use for this study.

Three previous studies described here supported a descriptive research utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Rainer (2001) used quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to better understand what made churches more successful in reaching the unchurched. To make a comparison, the Rainer group compared interview results of 353 new Christians, those who were once unchurched, with 350 long-time Christians who had recently moved from one church to another church. They also compared interview results of 101 pastors whose churches were highly effective in reaching the unchurched with 101 pastors who were not as successful. Successful churches were identified as those who had at least 26 conversions per year and a conversion ratio (membership/annual conversion) of less than 20:1 (Rainer, 2008). These persons were from seven different denominations, to include members of independent Christian and Baptist churches, some community churches, and other nondenominational churches.

Nestor (1993) organized training sessions (sharing and small group discussions), as well as a program evaluation (survey and questionnaire), and pretests and posttests to measure the increase in attitude and involvement. The purpose of the research was to increase involvement of church members after a training program to identify and use spiritual gifts in church ministries. Nestor (1993) personally contacted and invited members to participate in the training sessions. Thirty-three members were sent letters of invitation, along with a schedule of events and a statement of

the purpose for the training. Members were also contacted by telephone with 28 agreeing to participate. The participants were of varying gender, age, engagement level in the church, and theological background. The researcher's goal was to have 20 participants. The training program was organized like a retreat and met nine times. The participants completed a participation survey at the beginning of the training program and again 60 days later to be compared to the first survey results. This involved recording hours of involvement per week for 14 different activities of ministry. They also completed a personal readiness questionnaire at the beginning and end of the program. This was used to compare their attitude and the effectiveness of the program, as well as the participants' desire and willingness to become more involved. Sixty days later the personal readiness questionnaire was given again to measure any changes in the participants' attitude and engagement since the last administration of the questionnaire.

Simmons (2015) used qualitative and quantitative data from surveys and interviews of pastors, church leaders, and young adults to gather membership statistics, ministry participation, and interest data of young adults who attend church. Simmons used a two-section survey to gain information about the membership, participation, and program recommendations for millennials in the church. The researcher designed the first section to gather data from pastors and youth/young adult leaders. The second section was developed to gather data from churched and unchurched young adults between the ages of 18 and 29. Each section of the survey consisted of 10 multiple choice and fill in the blank questions. The researcher recruited 100 participants in the Washington, DC area, but ended the recruitment after 60 responses were obtained. The online surveys, conducted using Survey Monkey, were anonymous. The researcher used graphs, charts, and tables to present the data.

Research Population, Sampling Method, and Related Procedures

Recent trends revealed a decline in the active engagement of young adults in the church. Vibrant, effective Christian ministries of the 21st century need to know how to connect to the young adults by first understanding them and their beliefs (Probe Ministries, 2011). Thus, the researcher selected a large-scale survey, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS), of racial-ethnic Presbyterians completed in 2001 to gain information relevant to the target population. The racial-ethnic population refers to congregations that predominantly consist of members from racial-ethnic minority groups or multicultural congregations where at least 20% of the members are not White (USCLS, 2001). The Racial Ethnic Presbyterian Attenders survey was the best available data relevant to the target population for the study. Data from the USCLS self-administered survey helped the researcher measure the factors affecting active engagement and determine whether fulfilling the four drives of motivation supports the active engagement of the young adult population. U.S. Congregational Life surveyed over 500,000 worshipers (age 15 and above) in over 5,000 congregations. The researchers reported that “the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of worshipers are essential to understanding congregations and religious life in the United States” (USCLS, 2009, para. 1). They also encouraged churches to focus on their worshippers to provide them with resources to “better understand themselves, identify their strengths, and stimulate their efforts to create a positive future for themselves” (USCLS, 2009, para. 3).

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) is made available for download on the Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA); a collection of surveys, polls, and other data submitted by researchers. Containing 38 different USCLS datasets from both the 2001 and 2008/2009 collection periods, the 2001 Racial Ethnic Presbyterian survey had the highest African Americans participants. Of the 13,124 survey participants, 20.7% (2,722) identified themselves as

Black or African American. Of the 2,722 African American survey participants, 13.7% (372) met the age requirement for this study (ages 21–39). Therefore, as previously stated, the 2001 Racial Ethnic Presbyterian Attenders dataset was the best source for this study.

Since the survey dataset was from 18 years prior to this research project, it was important to compare and contrast the young adult experiences and perspectives between the findings from the 2001 survey data and current life experiences of young adults. To gain current perspectives relevant to the target population (African Americans between the age of 21–39), a convenience sample of six to eight young adults who are members of the targeted denomination were invited to participate in a qualitative interview. Due to the researcher's connection to the SMC church, these young adults were easily accessible and acquaintances of the researcher. The researcher used various methods to make the initial contacts with the potential interview participants: three were contacted by Facebook messenger, one by phone call and email, and the other four were contacted in person by the researcher. The goal was to have no less than six young adults, who participate in the church to some degree, agree to participate. Each potential participant was given or emailed a copy of the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) and asked to respond by contacting the researcher if they desired to participate. The six young adults (four males and two females) who agreed to be interviewed were from three different congregations and were engaged in varying degrees in their local church's ministries. They served as church officers and engaged in ministries and organizations within the church, as well as outside of the church. Using a descriptive research method, the Racial Ethnic USCL Survey and the qualitative interview data provided this study access to a large sample to understand associations and patterns related to the variables described above.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

African Americans hold religion and the church in high esteem (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Even though, studies of African American religion and religious participation have increased significantly, compared to other races, there remains a lack of research relating to African Americans young adult population (Taylor, Chatters, & Brown, 2014). This study focused on the active engagement of African American young adults (age 21–39) in the church; however, there was limited current survey data available on this population. Therefore, the researcher selected the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS). The survey collected data from a random sample of racial ethnic Presbyterian church attendees and focused on identifying unique congregational strengths in hopes of establishing effective changes. In April 2001, 171 predominately racial-ethnic or multicultural congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were surveyed. Predominately racial-ethnic congregations are described as “those in which at least half of members are identified as racial ethnics,” that is, non-White (USCLS, para. 4). Multicultural congregations are “those in which at least 20% of members are not White” (USCLS, para. 4).

Interview data were gathered from young adults who were current members of the SMC and engaged in ministries on various levels and at various degrees. To make sure data from both the 2001 survey and the current interviews were analyzing the same variables, similar interview questions were developed from the questions of the 2001 USCLS. These questions focused on each young adult’s level of engagement in various roles and ministries in the church, as well as the amount of encouragement given by leaders. These factors would be compared to their perceived sense of belonging. The interviews, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, asked participants about their current attitudes and experiences regarding church engagement and their sense of belonging in the church. The interviews were conducted one-on-one in a public, but secluded

room of the public library. This not only ensured privacy to participants but provided the opportunity to gain truthful and uninhibited responses from the participants. Participants were informed prior to the interview that the conversation would be recorded to support transcription. Upon the completion of the interview, the responses were transcribed using an electronic transcription software.

Instrumentation, such as surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and small-group discussions, provide the most accurate and most reliable source of quantitative information on determining the factors for the decline in the active engagement of young adults and understanding if there is a relation between motivational drives and active engagement of church members in this age group. The current study is descriptive and use both surveys and interviews to analyze the relationship between young adult sense of belonging and active engagement.

Operationalization of Variables

Specific variables were identified and maintained throughout the study. Since the focus of the study is young adults in the 21–39 age range, data were gathered from people in that age group. The Congregational Life Survey was based on responses from church attendees age 15 and above. Since the study focused on the young adult age group, which includes Millennials and Generation Xers, the researcher isolated the 21–39 age group and the desired ethnicity group (African American) from the data set.

The 60-question USCLS focused on “four fundamental areas of congregational life: spirituality and faith development, involvement in and connections to the congregation, community involvement, and future directions” (USCLS, 2002, para. 6). This study focused on those questions specifically related to a sense of belonging. Determining what factors have led to a lack of engagement required a closer examination of the influences, motivations, and obstacles/hindrances for prior engagement and the current lack of engagement. The amount of

engagement prior to disengagement is vital, thus the researcher anticipated that the level of engagement a young person experienced may be related to the likelihood of the young adults becoming involved or returning to active status with church ministries. The variables of this study are a sense of belonging and the level of engagement. Measurement of variables using the survey data and interview will be described here. Given the 2001 USCLS, a sense of belonging was measured by the participants' response to Question 19, "Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?"

The level of engagement for each survey participant was measured by Questions 3, 4, 5, and 18, 23, and 27 identified below:

- Question 3: "Are you regularly involved in any group activities here?"
- Question 4: "Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community (e.g., visitation, evangelism, outreach, community service, social justice)?"
- Question 5: "Do you currently have any of the following roles here?"
- Question 18: "Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this congregation?"
- Question 23: "Do you have any close friends in this congregation?"
- Question 27: "Have this congregation's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?" (Woolever, Wulff, Bruce, & Smith-Williams, 2002).

To measure the level of engagement for each interview participant, participants were asked twelve questions pertaining to their perspectives and experiences in decision-making, encouragement, activities, and roles in the church. See Appendix C for specific interview questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis procedures were established following a thorough review of the literature and based on the type of data that was being collected.

The data provided information on a discussion of their views on religious institutions and the reasons why they became churchless or less active in the life of the church. Based on the analyses described through the literature, the researcher utilized a two-part data analysis method. Part I, quantitative analysis, utilized a 2001 USCLS, and Part II, qualitative analysis used 2018 interviews. The 2001 USCLS, written in multiple-choice format, gathered responses from church attendees of various Presbyterian congregations. The researcher accessed the publicly available, archived data and downloaded the data set into a spreadsheet. Responses for African Americans from the 21–39 age group were isolated from the full data set. Even though the survey consists of 60 questions, only the questions related to a sense of belonging were used to build the data set for this study. To select specific questions to analyze, the researcher identified keywords within the survey questions that could be logically associated with the drive to bond and belong by Lawrence and Nohria (2002). This study sought to find a connection between engagement and a sense of belonging. This allowed the researcher to review the data and identify common patterns, attitudes, and behaviors based on the respondents' sense of bonding and belonging in relation to their level of active engagement in the church. The 2001 questions were used to develop interview questions for part II of the analysis.

Interviews of current young adults were used to find comparisons and contrasts between the 2001 dataset and the 2018 interview responses. One way of analyzing the qualitative interview data was through coding. Gibbs (2007) defined coding as a way of organizing and categorizing text from the interviews to establish a framework of thematic ideas. This helped the researcher define what the data was about and establish connections between the research ideas and the data

gathered. Interview data were coded in two coding stages, using open coding and a priori coding. Stage one—open coding—focused on commonalities and new ideas in the responses of the interviewees that helped the researcher to better understanding the perspectives of young adults relative to their sense of belonging and engagement. According to Saldaña (2013), open codes are most often words or short phrases (Saldaña, 2013). Thus, after carefully reading the interview data multiple times, data were broken down into distinct concepts and labeled for further review and connections for stage two coding. Saldaña (2013) stated, “coding is a cyclical process that requires you to recode not just once but twice (and sometimes even more)” (p. 37).

According to Gibson and Brown (2009), “a priori codes serve as general categories that derive from one’s research interest” (p. 133). Thus, stage two—a priori coding—focused on coding the data using the themes of belonging, roles, relationships, decision making, and engagement/involvement. A priori codes were centered around the aforementioned themes found in the literature review and the interview responses. This stage allowed the researcher to organize stage one data under the specific themes or categories in relation to young adult engagement.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design

A limitation that may affect the study is the data from the USCLS based on young adults from another denomination, and not specifically the church group that the researcher was affiliated with and was seeking to support. A delimitation that may affect the study is the researcher’s focus on African American rich churches and African American young adults. Based on a Religious Landscape Study conducted in 2014 by Pew Research Center (2017b), a snapshot of the demographics of the SMC based on generational cohorts and races are the focus of this study (Table 2).

Table 2

Demographics of the SMC Based on Generational Cohorts and Races

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
Blacks	94%
Whites	2%
Latino/Asian	1%
Mixed/Others	3%
Generation	Percent
Younger Millennial	8%
Older Millennial	16%
Generation X	25%
Boomers–Greatest	51%
Age groups	Percent
18–29	16%
30–49	33%
50 and above	51%

The full USCLS sample is not proportionate to the demographics of SMC as described in Table 2. Therefore, by examining the responses of the 21–39-year-old African Americans who participated in the USCLS, a more precise view of the expected population can be analyzed.

The USCLS survey consists of 60 questions that the researcher separated and organize based on their association with a sense of belonging. The study is limited by the participants' choice to answer all 60 questions, or more importantly, answer the questions that were essential to providing accurate and valid findings. Considering many young adults say their opinions and feelings are not heard by church leaders and older members (Thumma & Bird, 2011), it is possible that some survey participants in the 2001 survey may not have responded to specific questions that are important to the study, or may not have given accurate responses due to not being honest with themselves or trying to deceive the researcher (Adams & Lawrence, 2015).

Internal and External Validity

Based on the commonalities found in various research studied on the disengagement of the young adult population, a fair assumption is that this study yielded similar results. According to the USCLS (2009), the congregational life surveys used in 2001 are more reliable and valid because “previous studies of congregational life have based on small samples or in-depth case studies” (para. 4). They were also based on nontypical congregations, which would yield results not typical of all congregations. Previous studies relied on the views and opinions of the clergy or individual lay leaders. The 2001 congregational life survey collected information from all church attendees to provide unique perspectives about the strengths and struggles of congregations. The use of this 2001 self-administered anonymous survey provided reliable, credible, and dependable responses.

Expected Findings

Based on the extensive amount of literature found on factors that have affected the active engagement of young adults in church ministries, it was anticipated that findings from this study would reveal a strong associations between the four drive theory of motivation and the level of engagement in the young adult population. The recurrence of the four underlying factors showed a connection between the four drives of motivation with the reasons young adult disconnect or chose to disengage from church ministries.

According to the literature, young adults are not sure where they fit in the ministries of the church; they desire to learn more about spiritual gifts and where they fit in (Nestor, 1993). Young adults desire to not only define their purpose in ministry, but they want to engage in ministries that have a defined purpose. Even in the workplace, they want to engage in purpose-driven activities that do not feel like a waste of time. The literature revealed that by ensuring engagement in purposeful, defined activities, young adults would be more actively engaged (Rainer & Rainer,

2011). Thus, it is anticipated that the study would reveal that by helping young adults define their purpose, as well as, learn and understand how their gifts and skills work in the ministries of the church, young adults will be more willing to facilitate lasting engagement in the life of the church.

The literature also revealed that many young adults believe that people in the church are judgmental and preferred to disconnect and find a connection elsewhere (Barna, 2015). Young adults faced many challenges and turned to the church to help them learn how to overcome challenges and deal with failures. They desire to form meaningful, nonjudgmental relationships that not only help them deal with their challenges but create opportunities to make a real difference in the community. Thus, the expectation is that the study would reveal to church leaders on how to meet the needs of the young adult population by establishing relationships, being less judgmental, and motivate them to become engaged in the various purposeful activities and ministries of the church.

Ethical Issues in the Study

The study would provide insights on understanding possible reasons for the decrease in engagement, as well as ideas on increasing engagement and participation of young adults age 21–39 in the ministries and life of the local churches. The greatest benefit of the study would, in turn, provide suggestive strategies to other denominations or organizations that may be experiencing this same issue.

No conflict of interest is anticipated in the study protocol. The researcher has no supervisory role with the participants or their churches. No financial interests are involved in the study protocol. There were no potentially harmful risks to participating in the study, due to the use of the archival data set. There was no right or wrong answer, but all answers for the interview were based on their personal feelings, experiences, and level of engagement in their church's ministries. There were no risks to participating in this study other than providing information. However,

participants were assured that all information would be protected. All data collected were assessed for deductive disclosure risks and personally identifying information was removed. Any personal information would be coded when reporting the data in any publications. Any name or identifying information was kept securely via electronic encryption. None of the analyzed data had name or identifying information, but rather, a participant selected code was used during all data analysis.

The use of the chosen survey tool also eliminated any possibility of manipulation of responses. To eliminate any potential harmful risks to the qualitative interview participants, the researcher maintained confidentiality for the participants. Participants were assigned a pseudonym, and personally identifying information was eliminated during the transcription process. The data were also password protected to eliminate any possibility of compromise. To eliminate any discomfort in responding to personal feelings, experiences, and engagement in ministries of the church, interviews were conducted in private, but public location (a public library). Participants' agreements to participate were kept confidential so that those of the same church would not know of their peer's response or participation in the study. Additionally, interview transcript data and any study documents have been securely locked and password protected. Based on IRB requirements, these data and documents will be kept secured for three years and destroyed at the end of the 3-year period.

The researcher acknowledged that the questions were of a personal nature. Thus, the participants were free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. Interview participant were informed that they could skip any questions or choose not to answer. To participate was not a requirement and there is no penalty for not participating. Participant were also informed that if at any point they chose to withdraw from the interview, their responses and any identifying information would be withdrawn from the study and permanently destroyed.

The researcher explained to each participant that there would be no financial compensation for their participation, nor will their agreement or disagreement to participate have any adverse effect on their position in their respective church. However, their participation would help the SMC, as well as other denominations and organizations, better understand the factors surrounding the phenomenon, and provide recommendations for increasing young adult engagement in church ministries.

Each participant was given a copy of the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A) and asked to respond by email, phone, or text if they desired to participate. All participants were met individually and privately to be explained the purpose of the interviews, as well as, during the interview process. Chances of any ethical issues are minimal to none.

Chapter 3 Summary

The researcher in this study employed a descriptive research design. The researcher accessed data collected from a self-administered anonymous survey. The study utilized a survey used by the U.S. Congregational Life to evaluate and assist congregations in better understanding themselves, identifying their strengths, and stimulating their efforts to create a positive future. Based on the participants' level of engagement in church ministries, responses would be disaggregated, organized, and analyzed for commonalities of factors (patterns, attitudes, behaviors, etc.) that have affected young adult engagement, and to determine any relationship between their engagement and a sense of belonging. The data provided a better understanding of why young adults disconnect from the ministries of the church. The congregational life surveys used in this study are more reliable and valid than most previous studies of congregational life because the 2001 congregational life survey gathered information from all worshippers that attended church on that specific Sunday the survey was administered, as opposed to the survey being administered to

clergy or individual worshippers. Results provided a unique perspective of the participants about the strengths and struggles of their congregation.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Many young adults have disengaged from God and the church, potentially having a significant impact on the church and the young adult population in the church. A 2014 Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2015b) identified a decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within religious communities all over the world and in among various demographic groups. While this decrease in religious association is predominately among young adults, it is evident among people of all ages (Jones, 2019). The research that was detailed in this chapter focuses on examining the relationship between a sense of belonging and the active engagement of young adults in church ministries. The study consisted of two parts. Part I utilized preexisting and publicly available data from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) completed in 2001 and publicly disseminated by ARDA (Association for Religion Data Archive) to understand relationships between several factors measured in the survey that relate to the focus of this study, which was described in Chapter 3: Methodology .

To gain a more current perspective of the African American young adult experience, Part II qualitative data collection was added to the study. The proposal was revised, and IRB approval was given to include supplemental data collection using interviews of young adults age 21–39 in SMCs in the southeastern United States. The six young adults were interviewed regarding their sense of belonging in the SMC as it relates to active engagement in their local church. The goal of this data collection was to find points of comparison and contrast between the findings from the 2001 survey data and current life experiences of young adults in the SMC in 2018. The following components were discussed in relation to each portion of the data: (a) the description of the 2001 data set and the 2018 qualitative interview samples, (b) the methodology and analysis of the descriptive survey and the basic qualitative design, (c) the summary of the descriptive data analysis of the survey data and interview results, and (d) an analysis of the survey and interview data. In

conclusion, the chapter provided an in-depth discussion of the overall results and presentation of the findings that measured a sense of belonging for the two sets of young adults.

Description of the Sample

This study focused on the young adult age group 21–39, which includes Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) and millennials (born between 1981 and 1997). Responses were selected only from the identified age group and focused on questions related specifically to a sense of belonging. The rest of this section described the data sets for both parts of the study.

Description of the data set. Little data is available on the engagement of African American young adults (age 21–39) in the church. Therefore, the researcher used data collected in the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS), which surveyed a random sample of Racial Ethnic Presbyterian Church Attendees. Of the 13,124 survey participants from 171 predominately racial-ethnic or multicultural congregations, 2,722 (20.7%) identified themselves as Black or African American. Of the 2,722 African American survey participants, 372 (13.7%) met the age criteria for inclusion in this study (ages 21–39). Therefore, Part I sample size consisted of 372 African American young adults between the ages of 21–39 within the Presbyterian church in 2001.

Description of qualitative interview sample. The researcher sought to provide meaningful information regarding the Southeastern Methodist Church in one southeastern state. The researcher collected data from a small sample of participants from the targeted denomination, who were members of churches in a portion of the southeastern geographical region. The sample consisted of six young adults from one of the districts which consist of more than 30 churches. The goal was to have no fewer than six volunteers in the age range of 21–39 agree to participate. The potential participants were contacted by email, phone, Facebook messenger, or met individually and privately and explained the purpose of the study, as well the researcher's desire for them to participate in the study. Each was given a copy of the recruitment flyer (see Appendix

A) and asked to respond by email/call/text if they desired to participate. Of the eight potential participants initially contacted, six responded with their desire to participate. The first six to respond were selected as the interview sample for the study.

Once the required number of participants had been reached, participants were contacted to schedule a day and time for the interview. Prior to the interview, the participants signed an informed consent form agreeing to participate in the study. With their permission, each interview was audio-taped to ensure accuracy of the information collected for the study's data analysis. Participants were explained that the data, like all information collected during the interviews, would remain confidential. They were also assured that audio-taped files would be destroyed after transcription and files and notes related to the interviews would be stored on a password-protected laptop for security and destroyed after 3 years. Since questions were of a personal nature, participants were also told that they were free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. Participants were also free to skip any questions they did not wish to answer.

The sample consisted of six young adults (four males and two females) from three different congregations and who are all engaged in varying degrees in their local church's ministries. Two were married—one male with no children, and one female with a child. The other four were single and never married—three males and one female. The participants were either officers on their church's governing board and/or officers in a church organization and ministry. They were engaged in congregational life in varying degrees—participating in choirs, church schools, and youth ministries. Some participants also participated in mission ministries outside of the church.

Summary of the Findings

The use of a descriptive research method provided the opportunity to find commonalities between African American young adults on their perspectives on a sense of belonging and active engagement in the church. Even though the data collected from Part I (2001 USCLS) and Part II

(2018 interviews) were almost two decades apart, the results showed that there are similarities in their views and perspectives on feeling a sense of belonging and its impact on their engagement in the church. An internal threat to the validity of the result could have been in the selection of subjects from two different time periods, thus producing bias results. However, to alleviate any bias results, the researcher created a data collection instrument for Part II collection that was parallel to the Part I survey questions. The results also showed that those factors associated with a sense of belonging are related to the level of engagement in church ministries. The remainder of this section will describe the results from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews.

Survey results. Of the 372 survey participants, 278 (75%) reported feeling a sense of belonging, while 94 (25%) reported not feeling a sense of belonging. The 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) allowed the examination of the relationship between a sense of belonging and engagement of young adults in their respective churches based on their involvement, activities, roles, decision-making opportunities, friendships, and their feeling of encouragement.

Interview results. Based on the results from the survey, a priori codes or concepts were used to develop interview questions. These a priori codes included decision-making, encouragement, activities, and roles. The a priori codes are the leading concepts for this study on finding a connection between a sense of belonging and engagement and provided a comprehensive view of the common responses of the interview participants. Keywords or short phrase taken directly from each participant's response ensured validity and provided supporting evidence.

Detailed Analysis

Analyzed survey data. Using the question, "Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?" as the basis for determining a sense of belonging, the researcher used the

responses to the question to determine which of the two groups, belong and not belong, to place the respondents. There were seven possible responses to Question 19: Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?

- Yes, a strong sense of belonging that is growing
- Yes, a strong sense—about the same as last year
- Yes, but perhaps not as strong as in the past
- No, but I am new here
- No, and I wish I did by now
- No, but I am happy as I am
- Don't know/not applicable

Responses of “yes,” to any degree, was classified as “belong,” while responses of “no” or “don’t know” were classified as “not belong”.

There was a total of 372 survey participants who were African American and in the age range of 21–39. However, only 363 responded to Question 19. Thus, the following sample was used in analyzing the data: (a) Belong, $n = 272$; (b) Not Belong, $n = 91$.

Using the two categories of belong and not belong, two way cross-tabulations were conducted to quantitatively analyze the relationship between a sense of belonging and each of the six indicators of engagement in church. The rest of this section explained each indicator— involvement, activity, role, decision-making, friends, and encouragement, as well as the result of each cross-tabulation.

Church engagement indicator 1: Involvement. One measure of engagement is involvement. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 3: “Are you regularly involved in any group activities here? (Mark all that apply.)” The response choices were

- Yes, in Sunday school, church school, or Sabbath school

- Yes, in prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups
- Yes, in fellowships, clubs, or other social groups
- No, we have no group activities
- No, I am not regularly involved in group activities

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of their level of involvement in group activities differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and type of involvement in the church (measuring “devotional activities,” “educational activities,” “social activities,” and “no activities”). The association between sense of belonging and level of involvement in church were found to be statistically significant, Pearson $\chi^2 (3, N = 363) = 10.67$, $p = .014$, Cramer’s $V = .171$. Cramer’s V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 17% of the variance in the involvement in church was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant. See Table 3.

Table 3

Association Between Sense of Belonging and Involvement in Group Activities in Church

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Involvement	Education activities	67	24.6%	7	7.7%
Q3. Are you regularly involved in any group activities here?	Devotional activities	64	23.5%	6	6.6%
	Social activities	120	44.1%	14	15.4%
	No activities available	7	2.6%	8	8.8%
	Does not participate	93	34.2%	63	69.2%

The data showed that those who have a sense of belonging are more involved than those who do not. There were more respondents who felt a sense of belonging involved in all group activities compared to those who did not feel a sense of belonging. The analysis showed that 63.2% of those with a sense of belonging were involved in at least one group activity, while only 22% of those with no sense of belonging was involved in at least one group activity. Those who were involved in group activities showed a slight preference for social activities compared to educational or devotional activities. Approximately 69.2% of those who felt no sense of belonging was not involved in any group activity. Thus, it can be inferred that young adults who feel a sense of belonging are more involved in group activities in their church than those who feel no sense of belonging.

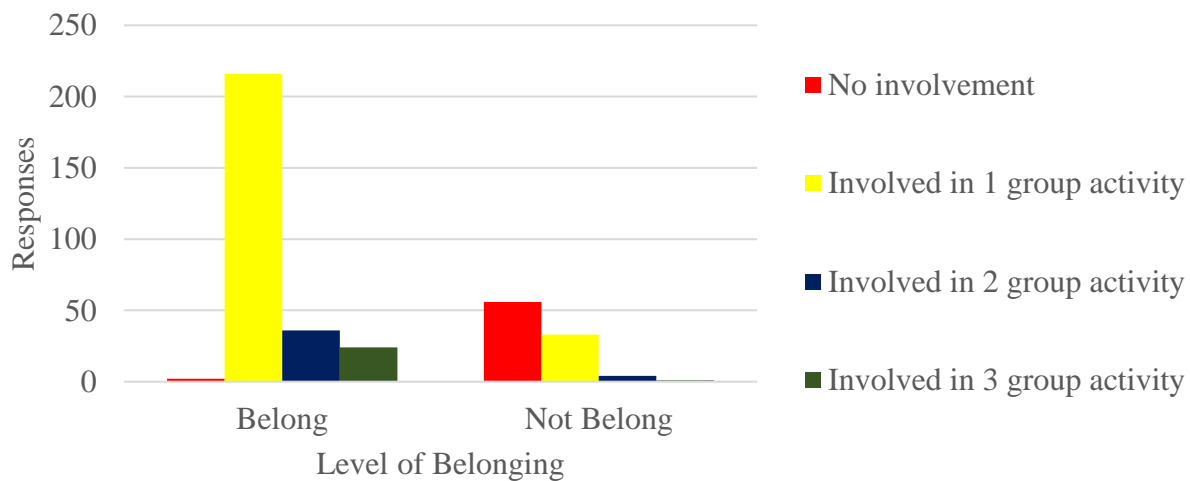


Figure 3. Belonging and involvement in group activities.

Church engagement indicator 2: Activity. Another observable measure of church engagement is participation in activities in the congregation or the community. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 4: “Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community (e.g., visitation, evangelism, outreach, community service, social justice)? (Mark all that apply.)” The response choices were

- Yes, in evangelism or outreach activities
- Yes, in community service, social justice, or advocacy activities of this congregation
- No, we don't have such activities
- No, I am not regularly involved

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of their participation in an activity in the congregation or the community differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and participation in any activity in the congregation or the community (measuring “community service,” “outreach and evangelism,” and “no activity”). The association between sense of belonging and participation in an activity were found to be statistically significant, Pearson $\chi^2 (2, N = 372) = 7.747, p = .021$, Cramer's $V = .144$. Cramer's V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 14% of the variance in the participation in activities was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant (see Table 4).

Table 4

Association Between Sense of Belonging and Activities

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Activities Q4. Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community . . .?	Community service	88	32.4%	10	11.0%
	Outreach & evangelism	57	21.0%	3	3.3%
	No activities available	12	4.4%	3	3.3%
	No response	137	50.4%	74	81.3%

In Table 4, the results of the cross-tabulation showed that approximately 45.2% of those who felt a sense of belonging regularly took part in some activity that reaches out to the wider community, while only 15.4% of those who felt no sense of belonging engaged in these types of activities, which included community service and outreach and evangelism activities. Based on the results shown in the table, those with a sense of belonging were more regularly involved in community service and outreach ministries.

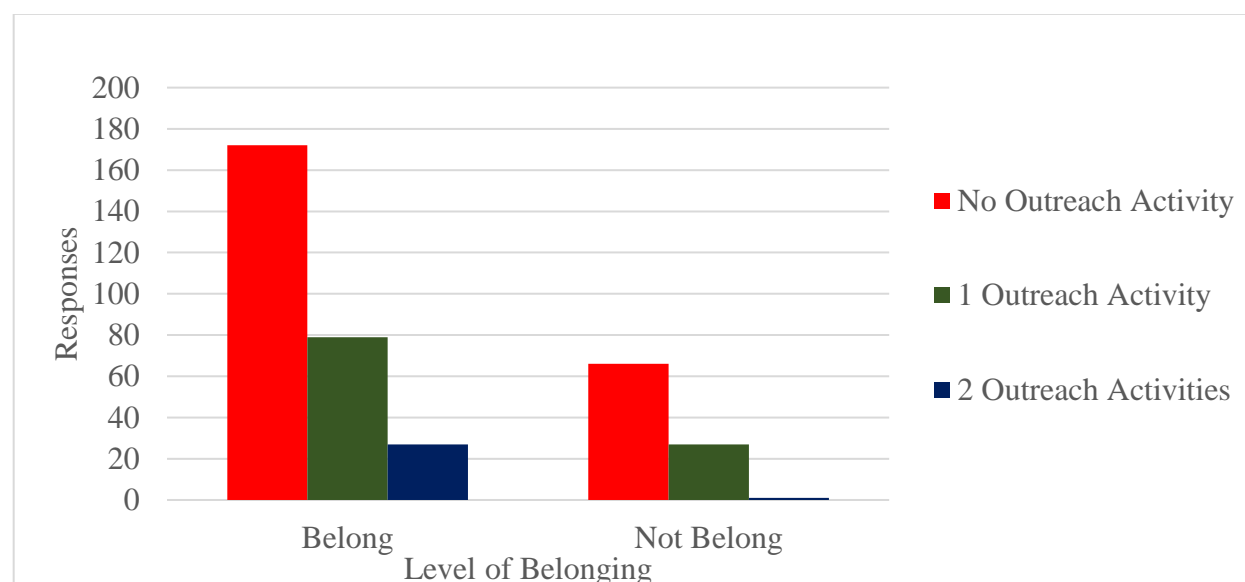


Figure 4. Belonging and participating in church or community activities.

Church engagement indicator 3: Role in the church. Another observable measure of church engagement is having a role in the church. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 5: “Do you currently have any of the following roles here? (Mark all that apply)”. The response choices were:

- Member of the governing board
- Member of a congregational committee or task force
- Leading or assisting in worship
- Officer or leader of men’s, women’s, youth, or other small groups
- Choir member, musician, or choir director

- Sunday school, church school, or Sabbath schoolteacher
- Other roles not listed here (specify):
- None

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of having a role in the church differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and having a role in the church (measuring “governance roles,” “committee roles,” “worship roles,” “group leader roles,” “music roles,” “teaching roles,” “other roles,” and “none”). The association between sense of belonging and having a role in the church were found to be statistically significant, Pearson $\chi^2(7, N = 372) = 27.730, p = .000$, Cramer’s $V = .273$. Cramer’s V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 27% of the variance in having roles in the church was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant (see Table 5).

Table 5

Association Between Sense of Belonging and Roles in Church

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Roles	Governance roles	27	9.9%	3	3.3%
Q5. Do you currently have any of the following roles here?	Committee roles	60	22.1%	3	3.3%
	Worship roles	38	14.0%	6	6.6%
	Group leader roles	47	17.3%	6	6.6%
	Music roles	88	32.4%	6	6.6%
	Teaching roles	39	14.3%	8	8.8%

Table 5 (continued)

Other roles	30	11.0%	3	3.3%
None	98	36.0%	70	76.9%

As shown in Table 5, approximately 36% of the young adults who felt a sense of belonging responded to having no role in the church, while the other 64% held at least one role. The majority of those who felt no sense of belonging held no role (76.9%), while the other 23.1% held at least one role. It is important to note that only 9.9% of those with a sense of belonging held governance roles in the church. This represented the lowest percentage of those who felt a sense of belonging and held some role in the church. The highest percentage of those who felt a sense of belonging (32.4%) was identified as having a role in the music ministry of the church.

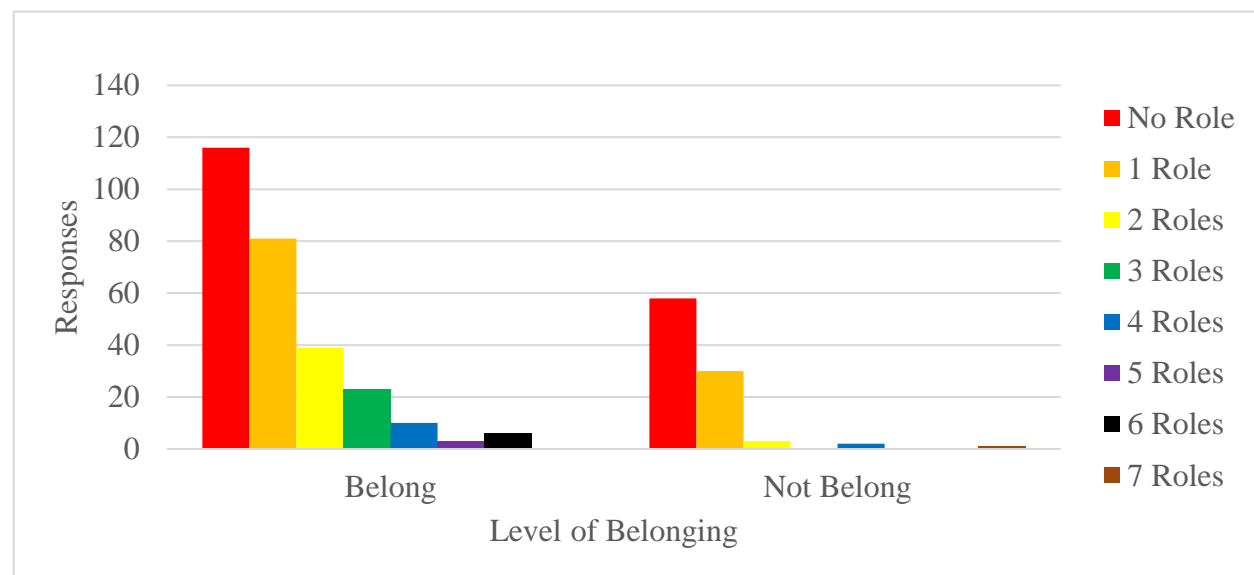


Figure 5. Belonging and church roles.

Church engagement indicator 4: Decision-Making. Another measure of church engagement is participating in decision-making. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 18: “Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this congregation?” The response choices were

- I have been given the opportunity and often participate in decision-making

- I have been given the opportunity and occasionally get involved in decision-making
- I have been given the opportunity but don't usually get involved in decision-making
- I have not been given an opportunity to be involved and this is fine with me
- I have not been given an opportunity to be involved and I am not happy about this

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of their participation in decision-making differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and participating in decision-making (measuring “not given opportunity and unhappy,” “not given opportunity and fine,” “given opportunity; not involved,” “given opportunity; occasionally involved,” “given opportunity and often participate”). The association between sense of belonging and participating in decision-making were found to be statistically significant, Pearson $\chi^2(4, N = 351) = 43.607, p = .000$, Cramer's $V = .352$. Cramer's V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 35% of the variance in the participation in decision-making was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant (see Table 6).

Table 6

Association between Sense of Belonging and Decision-Making Opportunities

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Decision Making Q18. Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this congregation?	Not given opportunity and unhappy	8	2.9%	5	5.5%
	Not given opportunity and fine	40	14.7%	34	37.4%
	Given opportunity; not involved	83	30.5%	26	28.6%
	Given opportunity; occasionally involved	63	23.2%	8	8.8%
	Given opportunity and often participate	73	26.8%	5	5.5%

As shown in Table 6, approximately 80.5% of those who felt a sense of belonging said they had been given the opportunity to be involved in important decisions; however, only 50% occasionally or often participated in decision-making. Of those who did not feel a sense of belonging, 42.9% were given the opportunity to be involved in important decisions; however, only 14.3% of them participated. It is also interesting to note that despite feeling a sense of belonging, 14.7% of those young adults stated that they have not been given the opportunity to engage in decision-making and were fine with this situation. Approximately 42.9% of the survey participants that did not feel a sense of belonging stated they were not given the opportunity. Based on the data, those with a sense of belonging were more involved in decision-making in their congregation compared to those who feel no sense of belonging. However, the results do show that despite being given the opportunity to be involved in decision-making, there was almost one-third of young adults in both categories, who felt and did not feel a sense of belonging, that chose to not get involved.

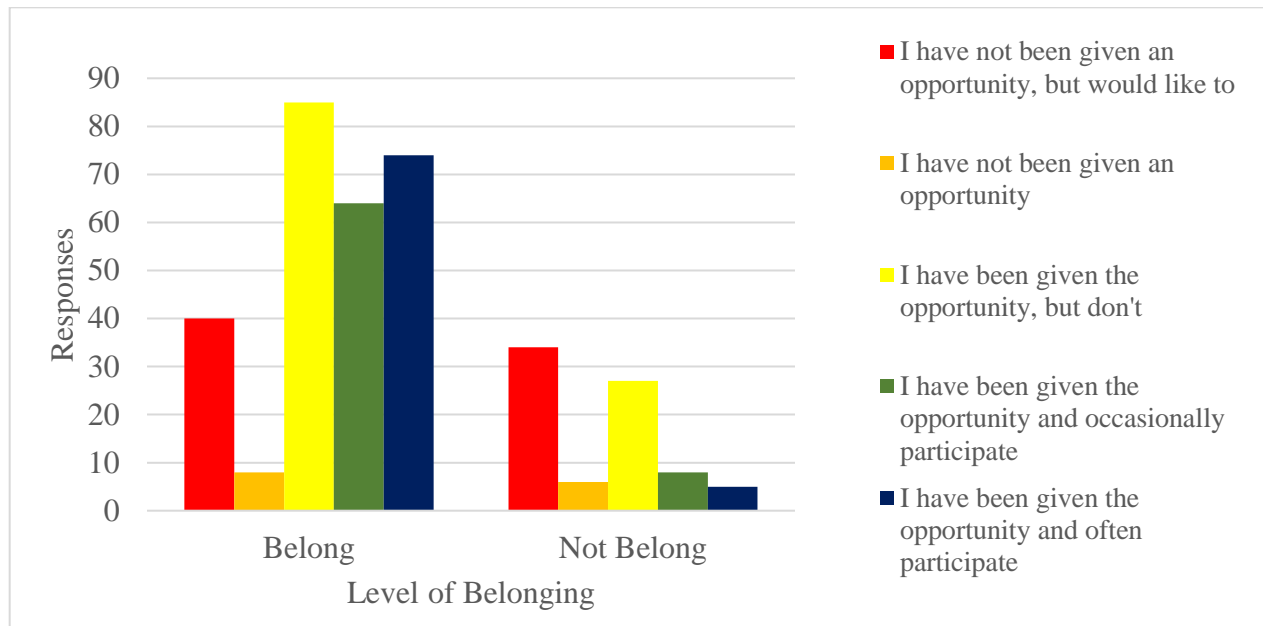


Figure 6. Belonging and decision-making opportunities.

Church engagement indicator 5: Friends. Another measure of church engagement is having friends in the congregation. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 23: “Do you have any close friends in this congregation?” The response choices were

- No, I have little contact with others from this congregation outside of activities here
- No, I have some friends in this congregation, but my closest friends are not involved here
- Yes, I have some close friends here as well as other close friends who are not part of this congregation
- Yes, most of my closest friends are part of this congregation

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of having friends in the congregation differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and having friends in the congregation (measuring “no, little contact outside of activities here,” “no, some friends

here,” “closest friends are not here,” “yes, some close friends here,” and “yes, most of my closest friends are here”). The association between sense of belonging and participating in decision-making were found to be statistically significant, Pearson $\chi^2 (3, N = 363) = 8.482, p = .037$, Cramer’s $V = .153$. Cramer’s V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 15% of the variance in having friends in the congregation was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant (see Table 7).

Table 7

Association Between Sense of Belonging and Friends in the Congregation

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Q23. Do you have any close friends in this congregation?	No, little contact outside of activities here.	31	11.4%	19	20.9%
	No, some friends here. Closest friends are not here.	65	23.9%	22	24.2%
	Yes, some close friends here.	151	55.5%	35	38.5%
	Yes, most of my closest friends are here.	22	8.1%	9	9.9%

Based on Table 7, those with and without a sense of belonging had the highest percentage of having “some” close friends in their congregation, and the lowest in having “most” of their closest friends in their congregation. The results showed that 63.6% of those with a sense of belonging had friends in their congregation compared to 48.4% of those without a sense of belonging. However, they equally responded that approximately 24% of them had some friends in the congregation, but their closest friends are not a part of their congregation. So, even though it appears that having friends in their congregation appears to be an important factor, it is apparent that most of their closest friends are not.

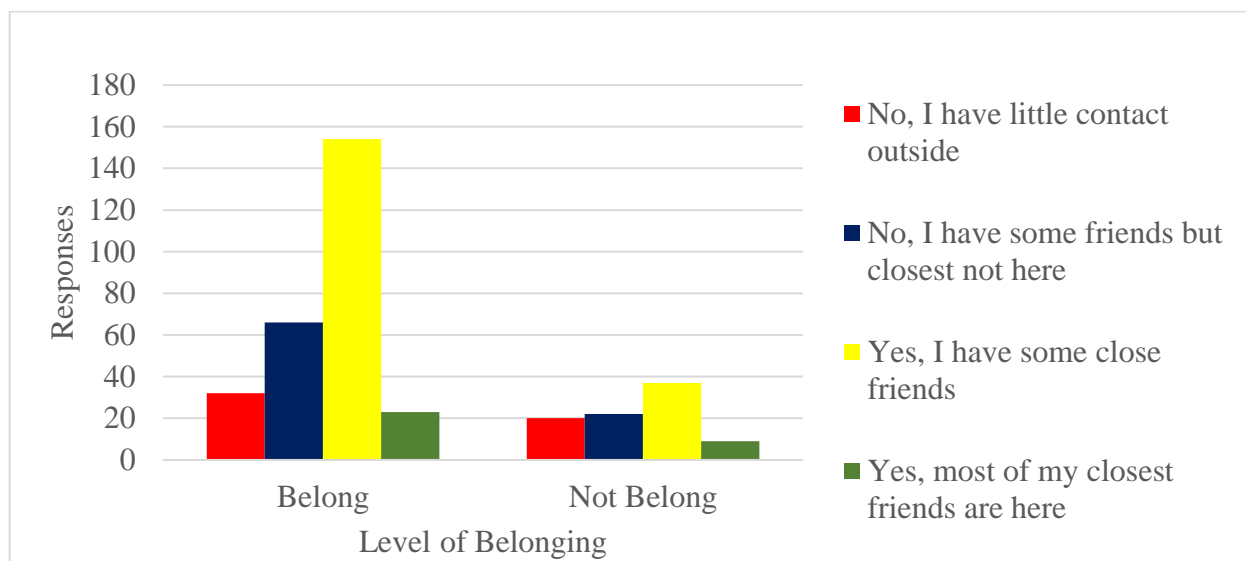


Figure 7. Belonging and friends in the congregation.

Church engagement indicator 6: Encouragement. Another measure of church engagement is being encouraged by church leaders. Survey participants were asked to respond to Question 27: “Have this congregation’s leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?” The response choices were

- Yes, to a great extent
- Yes, to some extent
- Yes, to a small extent
- Not at all
- Don’t know

A two-way cross-tabulation contingency table was conducted to evaluate African American young adult perceptions of being encouraged by church leaders differed for those who had a high sense of belonging and those who had a low sense of belonging. The two variables were sense of belonging (perceived sense of belonging and no perceived sense of belonging) and being encouraged by church leaders (measuring “not at all,” “small extent,” “some extent,” “great extent,” “don’t know”). The association between sense of belonging and being encouraged by

church leaders were found to be statistically significant, Pearson χ^2 (4, $N = 353$) = 89.768, $p = .000$, Cramer's $V = .504$. Cramer's V revealed a moderate effect size, that is, 50% of the variance in being encouraged by church leaders was accounted for by stance in sense of belonging. Use of standardized residual analysis indicated each pairwise comparison difference was statistically significant (see Table 8).

Table 8

Association Between Sense of Belonging and Encouragement from Congregational Leaders

Survey items	Response category	Belong		Not belong	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Encouragement	Not at all	10	3.7%	10	11.0%
Q27. Have this congregation's leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?	Small extent	33	12.1%	14	15.4%
	Some extent	71	26.1%	18	19.8%
	Great extent	134	49.3%	12	13.2%
	Don't know	12	4.4%	32	35.2%

When it comes to being encouraged by church leaders to use their gifts and skills, table 8 shows that 91.9% of those who felt a sense of belonging was encouraged by church leaders, compared to 53.8% that did not feel a sense of belonging. The data also showed that 49.3% of those with a sense of belonging felt encouraged to a great extent. On the other hand, 46.2% of those who felt no sense of belonging did not feel encouraged at all or did not know if they felt encouraged by their church leaders. Therefore, it can be ascertained that feeling a sense of belonging is related to being encouraged by church leaders.

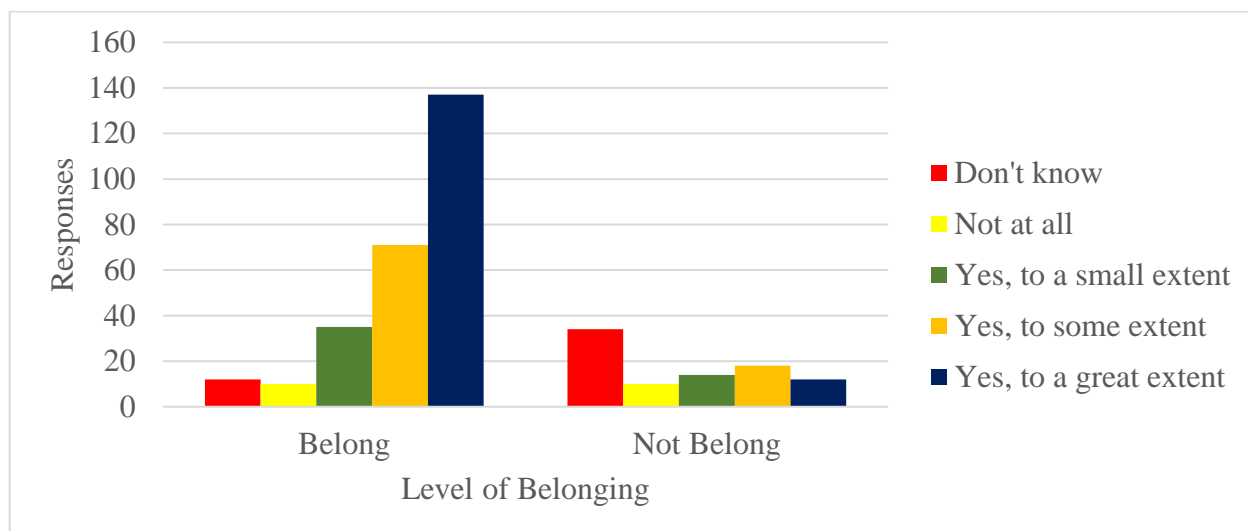


Figure 8. Belonging and encouragement.

Analyzed interview data. Analysis of Phase II data were done in two coding stages—open coding and a priori coding. Coding provided a way to organize key words and phrases found in the interview data, and established connections between the research ideas and the data gathered (Gibbs, 2007). Open coding focused on commonalities and new ideas in the responses of the interviewees that help in better understanding the perspectives of young adults relative to their sense of belonging and engagement. Data were broken down into distinct concepts and labeled for further review and connections to stage two coding. A priori coding focused on the themes of decision making, encouragement, activities, and roles – predetermined themes of interest (Gibson & Brown, 2013). A priori coding allowed the researcher to organize open coding data under the specific themes and focus of this study in relation to young adult engagement. Interview data was categorized under the predetermined themes based on the literature found on each theme.

Open coding. In analyzing the responses to the interview questions, several ideas and responses appeared to be a common focus of the participants. This section discussed these common ideas and how they have affected the participants decision to engage in the various ministries of the church, as well as their sense of belonging. These open coding themes were focused on the declining population, older members not being open to change, young adults having

a voice and decision-making, establishing mentoring relationships, and understanding how the church works.

Church is slim (declining population). According to a 2014 Religious Landscape Study, there is a decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within religious communities. In 2002, the SMC initiated an effort to revitalize the church due to a decline in membership and an increase in exiting of the youth and young adult populations. Even at this present time, 16 years later, the interview participants agree that based on their experiences, there is still a decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population in their local church, as well as, in the denomination. Participant 1 characterized the declining population as, “The young adult presence in my church is slim.” Participant 4, who participates in church organizations beyond the local church walls stated, “It’s rare that we see any young adults, and the few that I do occasionally see, also recognize that our representation in the church is very low.” The presence of young adults in a church is a sign of how a church is growing, as well as the future status of a church. The lack of attendance and active engagement can affect the vitality of the church, and lead to a dying congregation and possibly a dying denomination. Participant 5 believed that “there is a decline in the presence of young adults because they are leaving the denomination and going to nondenominational churches to get a better experience.” This decline is not limited to any religious denomination, race, or location. Thus, if this decline or exit of the young adult population continues, this could eventually lead to detrimental results for the future of the church.

Based on the experiences of the interview participants, several reasons or factors were suggested, such as church not being on the top of the priority list and time being a challenge. Participant 6 stated, “I agree that young adults don’t come to church because they make other things a priority.” This millennial generation is inundated with enormous work pressures and

choices for leisure and social activities (Simmons, 2015). According to Participant 2, many young adults “have children that are involved in extracurricular activities, which makes it difficult for most of the young adults within the religious community to be engaged.” Young adults are very self-focused; they are focused on their careers, their peer groups, their relationships, and their communities. They often must prioritize their day-to-day life. They feel pressured to perform and reach their greatest achievements in all they do with work, volunteer activities, school activities, sports, grades, and more (Becton, Walker, & Farmer, 2014). Thus, even though the church may be important, it is not a priority.

Participant 4 stated, “There are many challenges and a few that I can attest to. Time, for example, is a challenge. This age group is the working class. Coming to church on Sunday is the only time they can dedicate to serving and working in the church. Getting more involved would require more time.” Thus, with limited time to perform all their tasks, the young adult population must prioritize and choose who to use their available time, and still meet all their obligations. Attending and participating in church or church ministries tends to end up at the end of the list of priorities.

Stuck on tradition (not open to change). As time changes, cultures change. As cultures change, churches must stay current and ensure that they stay relevant to the young adult population. Sometimes, staying current and relevant may require the need for some changes. Based on a study by the Fuller Youth Institute (2014), many congregations recognize a gap between what they offer and what young people need in their complex culture. Keeping their church relevant was reported as an obstacle by 36% of the pastors who participated in the study. Participant 3 of the current study stated, “I’m tired of the same ole things Sunday after Sunday.” Church leaders and older members must be willing to make those necessary changes. However, some young adults felt that older adults and leaders are not open to changes. Participant 3 also

stated, “I basically feel like the church is stuck on tradition and don’t want change. We need to work on bridging the gap and drawing the youth back.” Participant 5 stated, “The challenges that have seen in the engaging and involving young adults ages 18–39 in activities is that we [young adults] would like to change it up by doing things that involve us.” Participant 2 stated, “There are some people who have been doing things the same way for so long that they do not believe in change.”

The interview participants want to actively engage in church ministries and take on leadership positions. However, many feel that older members are not willing to make changes that will allow the younger members to take on leadership roles. Participant 2 stated, “The challenges that I see with young adults taking roles in the church is that there are some people who are not willing to move out and let the young adults take those roles.”

To have a say (voice and decision-making). Based on conversations with interview participants, some voiced the concern that their opinions and feelings are not heard by church leaders, especially older members and church leaders. Participant 1 stated, “I sometimes feel that they don’t trust my opinions and thus are not accepting or willing to consider it.” Similar concerns were expressed by Participant 3 who stated,

When suggestions are made the adults/seniors don’t consider or allow us, young adults, to have a say in anything. I feel like that’s why we lost so many young adults in the church. It appears older adults don’t trust us or feel like we are not able to carry on the position task or responsibilities that they would like to entrust to us.

On the other hand, there were some young adults who felt that their opinion is appreciated and accepted by church leaders and older members. They felt they had a say in decision making. Participant 4 stated, “My church makes me feel very comfortable expressing my opinions and ideas. In fact, they encourage it. They are very interested in what the youth thinks about service,

community outreach, and the future of our church.” Participant 6 stated, “I believe the church members trust me and know that I am dependable, and they can call on me whenever they need to.” Several interview participants are in leadership positions and thus can engage in decision-making. Some of them are Stewards or Trustees, or organizational Presidents. Thus, they are a member of the church’s Official Board. Participant 2 stated, “I also have the opportunity to voice my concerns during official board meetings on new policies and/or changes that are or need to be made.” Participant 5 felt supported and comfortable with “sharing ideas and opinions in decision-making at the church by having meetings or just seeing what changes needs to be done.”

Keep me on track (mentoring and guidance). Another reoccurring concept expressed by the interview participants was the importance of having mentors to encourage them and keep them on track. Participant 5 stated that many in the congregation have “watched me grow up . . . many are like mentors and spiritual leaders for me.” Relationships are important to young adults. Participant 1 stated, “Those members that I consider as close friends help me by giving me helpful guidance and advice.” Genuine care, unconditional love, and support are important to young adults. They desire to feel loved, welcomed and cared for. Participant 2 stated that “With the close friends in the congregation, I can depend on them when things are not going the best to encourage me and help me along the way.”

Not only are young adults concerned with having mentors and relationships that will help guide them through their spiritual journey, but they also want to be a mentor to others. Participant 3 described being a part of an organization in the local church that “mentors the young girls,” and feeling good about “communicating with the young or little people . . . because they seem to take what I am telling them into consideration.”

However, not all young adults have been able to establish mentoring relationships within the church environment. Participant 3 stated, “In my case or situation, everyone is very

judgmental.” Young adults face many challenges and turn to the church to help them learn how to overcome challenges and deal with failures. They desire to form meaningful, non-judgmental relationships that not only help them deal with their challenges but create opportunities to make a real difference in the community.

Understanding how the church works. The future of the Church is dependent upon the development of young adults whose faith life is nurtured by an understanding of the church’s mission and their role in that mission. Participant 4 believed that “ignorance is another challenge” that young adults face in the church. Ignorance in the sense of not “understanding how the church works. They do not understand how important each organization and ministry are when mobilizing and spreading the gospel.” Therefore, some shy away from getting involved. Participant 4 also stated, “Some of our younger people may think that these roles are a lot harder than they are, and thus they may feel discouraged.” They desire to not only define their purpose in ministry, but they want to engage in ministries that have a defined purpose. So, they need to understand how the church works, how the ministries of the church work together to fulfill the church’s purpose, and how they as individuals fit in the operation and functions of the church.

A priori coding. Four common themes were found in the interview responses and the literature. Based on the literature, young adults seek involvement in ministries of the church through participating in activities and decision-making opportunities, having roles, and feeling encouraged by church leaders and older adults. This section will discuss the responses of the interview participants on these four themes.

Decision-making. One of the biggest concerns of the interview participants was being included in the decision-making process of the church. Reoccurring themes or open codes such as *participating with the official board*, *the church wants or don’t want to hear our opinions and views*, and *trust* is directly linked to the decision-making code. Half of the participants felt like

there is little engagement of young adult in the decision-making process. Participant 1 stated, “Not many of us are involved in any decision-making for the church.” Participant 3 stated, “Not too much decision making comes from the young adults.” Participant 6 is a member of a congregation where “no other young adults have any involvement in decision making.” Young adults want to be involved in the full aspect of the church. However, some feel like they are given the opportunity to engage in decision making that only involved the youth or young adult population. Participant 5 stated, “Young Adults are involved in decision-making for the church by sharing our opinions on things that have to deal with the young adults only.”

The interview participants who saw little engagement in the decision-making process by the young adults in their church attribute this to what is perceived to be a lack of trust in the opinion and decision of the young adults from the older adults and church leaders. They also perceive that older adults and church leaders believe that young adults are not able to fulfill the tasks assigned to them [young adults]. Even if this is not the true belief of the older adults and church leaders, this is what is perceived by the young adults who participated in the survey. This perception can also be linked to a lack of intergenerational relationships formed in the church. As participant 3 stated, “we need to work on bridging the gap.” Interview participants felt that their opinion is not received by the church leaders and older adults, and thus, they are not comfortable sharing their ideas due to rejection and or the feeling that others are judgmental.

On the other hand, some of the young adult interview participants hold leadership positions that afford them the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process. Four of the six participants are church officers and on the Official Board. Participant 6 stated, “I am President of the Trustee Board.” Participant 2 stated, “The positions I hold at my church are a member of the Steward Board.” Participant 1 stated, “I am a Jr. trustee. So, I help the Senior Trustee board.” And Participant 4 stated, “I am also a Trustee.” Members of the trustee and steward board are part of

the governing board that makes important decisions about the church, relating to the upkeeping of the church, the finances of the church, and the spiritual life of the church. As a member of the Steward Board, Participant 2 stated, “Being a member of the Steward Board, I am involved in determining the pastor’s salary. I also have the opportunity to voice my concerns during official board meetings on new policies and/or changes that are or need to be made.” Participant 4 explained that “As a trustee, we are in charge of the upkeeping of the church building, so I am able to help make decisions that will keep the church going or operating.” Being a Trustee in the SMC is a position that is elected by the church members. The position of Steward is appointed by the Pastor. According to the doctrine and discipline of the SMC, these officers “must be fruitful and of good nature or acquired ability to transact the spiritual and temporal business of the church” (Denominational literature source, 2017, p. 65). The individuals in these officer positions must have a high trust level of the church members and Pastor. Evidently, their opinions and abilities are held in high esteem by those who put them in those positions. However, based on the responses of the interview participant, they are fortunate, but they do not see this for most of the young adults in their respective congregations or other congregations.

Two of the six participants do not feel supported by their congregation or leaders. However, the other four out of six participants felt supported and were encouraged to engage in church ministries. Participant 2 stated,

The church supports me in sharing my ideas by seeing how my ideas can work or may not work for what we are trying to accomplish. If the ideas shared does not work, we come up with new ideas and see if they will work. It is like doing a trial and error. It makes me feel comfortable because I feel that at least my opinion has some value.

Participant 4 stated, “My church makes me feel very comfortable expressing my opinions and ideas. In fact, they encourage it. They are very interested in what the youth thinks about service,

community outreach, and the future of our church.” Four of the six interview participants felt that they were involved in some way with decision-making and felt supported by their church leaders and older members to engage in the decision-making process. For those who felt otherwise, more work must be done to reverse these feelings of disconnect.

Based on the participants’ responses in relation to decision-making, being involved in decision-making was very important in experiencing a sense of belonging for these young adults, and thus led to a greater desire to engage in church ministries.

Encouragement. Interview participants were asked, “How have your congregational leaders encouraged or not encouraged you in finding and using your gifts and skills for the church?” Four of the six young adult participants said they personally were encouraged to use their gifts and skills in the church. Two of six participants said they were either not encouraged at all, or encouraged, but did not feel supported to use their gifts and skills in the church. Participant 5 stated, “The congregational leaders encourage me to use my gifts and skills in the church.” Participant 4 stated, “In fact, they encourage it. They are very interested in what the youth thinks about service, community outreach, and the future of our church.” However, Participant 3 expressed that, “The congregation has encouraged on several ways just not fully supported me in my gifts.” Even though Participant 6 was encouraged to stay involved, the participant believed that “at the end of the day everything is up to me” as to whether to participate or not participate in the life of the church. There was great concern that Participant 6 felt that “young adults don’t have any encouragement or anyone to make them feel like participating in the church should be a priority.”

Participant 1 stated, “Many times, I don’t feel encouraged or motivated to use my skills and gifts.” Despite feeling good and blessed to use gifts and skills in the service of the church, Participant 1 stated, “However, when I feel like I am not appreciated, I am not willing to work

anymore. So, I tend to not use my skills all the time.” Participant 6 believed that “young adults don’t have any encouragement or anyone to make them feel like participating in the church should be a priority.” Thus, encouragement was key and important in motivating engagement.

Participant 1 expressed the thought of leaving the church due to the lack of encouragement and appreciation from church leaders. Therefore, encouraging the young adults to use their skills and gifts in ministries of the church is connected to retaining and motivating engagement of the young adult population of the church.

Activities. Based on the interview responses, all six are actively engaged in one or more activities in their respective churches. Participant 4 stated, “I think it helps to have active membership in a church.” Based on the responses of the interview participants, active membership can be perceived as consistent engagement in church activities and organizations. Several of the interview participants engage in and support the activities of the Young People’s Division (YPD), such as the children’s church, the YPDs, and the youth choir). Participant 3 stated, “I assist with children’s church.” Participants 2, 3, and 5 support and assist with the YPD.

Participant 1 enjoyed operating “the sound system every Sunday.” The other five out of six participants sang on one or more choirs in the church, whether it be the male choir or the gospel choir, or even helping with the youth choir. Participant 6 stated, “As far as our church is concerned, it doesn’t seem as if we have many adults ages 18–39. Those we do have, participate in the choir.” Participant 3 stated, “I also participate with the praise and worship team, which serves before church service every Sunday.” Thus, music seemed to be a common factor within these participants. Participant 2 stated, “There are two young men who render the music on Sunday mornings. One plays the organ and the other plays the drums.” So, it can be ascertained that the young adult interview participants are connected to the church through music, be it through singing in the choir, playing the music, or operating the sound system.

Acquiring opportunities to give through serving others is important to the young adult population. Participant 3 noted that she is a member of the Women's Missionary Society which affords some young adults the opportunity to "engage in activities such as visiting the sick and shut-in elder members of the church. They also visit the nursing homes and make care packages for our troops." Participant 6 stated, "I cut the church lawn and help with cleaning the church." Maintaining and cleaning the church is a shared responsibility for Participant 6 who stated that this "saves us money and helps everyone to get involved and take the responsibilities that the board [Trustee Board] is supposed to serve."

Roles. Several of the interview participants are active with various organizations in the church and thus serve in many roles or positions with those organizations. Participant 1 stated, "Some of them [young adults] are officers in the church, or with the different organizations." As stated previously, four of the participants serve as either a Trustees or Stewards, thus they are a member of the official board. Many of the interview participants are active with other organizations in the church, such as the Lay Organization, the WMS, the Usher Board, Steward Board, Pulpit Aid, the Sons of Allen and Daughters of Sarah, and the Sunday School. The participants all agreed that there are not many young adults 18–39 who are actively engaged in the church, thus most of the participants hold multiple roles. This phenomenon can be linked to the 20/80 problem presented by Thumma and Bird (2011).

The 20/80 problem argues that 20% of the people [in the church] do 80% of the work while most of the rest do nothing. Based on the multiple roles held by many of the interview participants, it can be assumed that 20% of the young adults in the church do 80% of the work, while the other young adults do nothing, or rather are not present. Participant 2 stated, "I am are a member of the Steward Board, Church Secretary, Treasurer, and member of the male and gospel choirs. I am a member and the secretary of the men's group. I am also a member of the lay

organization.” Participant 2 also stated that there are a few young adults in the congregation who serve as “YPD Director and Christian Education Director.” Participant 3 stated, I am “historian statistician for the Women’s Missionary Society, the secretary for the pulpit aid, and secretary for the Daughters of Sarah, who mentors the young girls in the church.” Participant 5 stated, “I am a member of the worship team, a Sunday School teacher with the pre-school class, the 3rd Vice President of the YPD organization on the area level. I am also the secretary of our local church’s Lay Organization.” Participant 4 serves as “president of the Lay organization and the Gospel Choir”, and a Trustee. Participant 4 also stated, “I volunteer or accept nominations for different roles in the church.”

Despite the active engagement of the interview participants, there are still many other young adults in their respective churches that are not engaged. The participants were asked to identify any challenges, if any, they have seen in young adults 18–39 taking roles in the church?” Participant 4 stated, “Some of our younger people may think that these roles are a lot harder than they are, and thus they may feel discouraged.” Participant 2 stated, “There are some people who are not willing to move out and let the young adults take those roles” that they’ve held for many years.

Ancillary findings. Based on a study conducted by the Barna Group (2013a), establishing a meaningful relationship is important to engaging young adults in the church. The study showed that 87% of the active young adults had an adult or minister in their church who was a close friend or mentor. Therefore, a crosstabulation of the data from the USCLS was performed to analyze the relationship between encouragement and involvement. The goal was to determine whether young adults who are encouraged are more involved in the church. Table 9 describes this cross-tabulation.

Table 9

Involvement Verses Encouragement Cross Tabulation

		Encouragement					
		1	2	3	4	5	Total
Involvement	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
	1	43	18	38	74	113	286
	2	2	1	9	5	22	39
	3	1	1	2	9	13	26
Total		46	20	49	89	149	353

Notes.

Encouragement:

1—Don't know 2—Not at all 3—Yes, to a small extent 4—Yes, to some extent 5—Yes, to a great extent

Involvement:

0—No involvement in group activities 1—Involved in 1 group activity 2—Involved in 2 group activities 3—Involved in 3 group activities

Based on Table 9, most of the young adults are involved in 1 group activity. This group represents 81% of the survey participants. Approximately 78% of those who are involved in one group activity reported being encouraged at a small to a great extent. The data also shows that the greatest percentage of those involved in 2 and 3 group activities report being encouraged at a great extent.

Another cross-tabulation was conducted between roles and decision-making opportunities. The goal was to determine if young adults who have more roles in the church have more opportunities to engage in decision-making. Based on Table 10, 31.9% of the participants reported being given the opportunity to participate in decision-making but did not. Of those who chose not to engage in decision-making, close to 44% of them have no role in the church, and 32% of them have 1 role. Approximately 22.5% of the participants reported being given the opportunity and often participating. Of those, who often participate in decision-making, 50.6% of them have one or more roles. Overall, 43% of all participants have been given the opportunity to engage in decision-making and have either occasionally or often participate. It is also important to note that

21% of all participants reported not being given the opportunity to engage and actually do not want to, despite the fact that approximately 81% of them either have no roles in the church (35 out of 74) or have one role (25 out of 74).

Based on the data, it can be inferred that despite the number of roles young adults are given, the majority do not engage in decision-making, even when given the opportunity. Further studies may be needed to determine why these young adults chose not to participate despite being given the opportunity.

Table 10

Decision-Making Versus Role Cross Tabulation

		Roles							
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Decision-Making	1	35	25	6	5	1	2	0	74
	2	7	4	0	1	1	0	1	14
	3	49	36	14	8	3	1	1	112
	4	29	25	7	4	5	0	2	72
	5	39	16	15	5	2	0	2	79
Total		159	106	42	23	12	3	6	351

Note.

Roles: The values 0-6 refer to the number of roles the participant is involved in.

Decision-Making:

1. I have not been given an opportunity
2. I have not been given an opportunity but would like to
3. I have been given the opportunity, but don't
4. I have been given the opportunity and occasionally participate
5. I have been given the opportunity and often participate

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 provided answers to the research question, “What relationship exists among young African American adults between their sense of belonging in a church and level of engagement in church ministries?” The study was divided into two parts—a quantitative portion that used pre-existing data from a 2001 United States Congregational Life Study (USCLS) and a qualitative portion that utilized current interviews of a sample of young adults. Both parts focused

on the six variables of engagement to analyze past and current perspectives of young adults in relation to the research question. Several findings were discovered from the data.

Finding 1: Involvement. Approximately 63.2% of those with a sense of belonging was involved in one group activity, as opposed to 22% of those with no sense of belonging being involved in at least one group activity. The data showed that those who have a sense of belonging are more involved than those who do not.

Finding 2: Activities. Even though more than 50% of the young adults in both belonging and not belonging participated in no community activities, those who have a sense of belonging are engaged in more community activities than those who do not.

Finding 3: Roles. The majority of those who felt no sense of belonging held no role (76.9%), while the other 23.1% held at least one role. On the other hand, 64% of those with a sense of belonging held at least one role. Thus, those who have a sense of belonging are engaged in more roles than those who do not. Considering it is inferred that current young adults want to be engaged in the church, it is no surprise that the interview participants hold multiple roles in the church. However, they expressed the concern that there are still many young adults who are not engaged because they fear that taking on responsibilities in different roles are harder than they are.

Finding 4: Decision-Making. Approximately 80.5% of those who felt a sense of belonging said they had been given the opportunity to be involved in important decisions; However, only 50% of them participated in decision-making. Therefore, those who felt a sense of belonging were involved more in important decision-making.

Based on the interview data from the current young adults, one of their biggest concerns was being included in the decision-making process of the church. Half of the participants felt like there is little engagement of the young adults in the decision-making process, and that they are mostly included in decision-making only when it involves the youth or young adults of the church.

Finding 5: Encouragement. Of those that felt a sense of belonging, 91.9% felt encouraged to use their gifts and skills, while 3.7% felt no encouragement at all. On the other hand, 46.2% of those who felt no sense of belonging did not feel encouraged at all or did not know if they felt encouraged by their church leaders. Therefore, those who have a sense of belonging feel more encouraged than those who do not. Based on interviews with current young adults, the majority express being encouraged at one point or another by church leaders or older adults to use their gifts and skills in church ministries.

Finding 6: Friends. Based on the data, there was no difference in the number of friends in the congregation of those who have a sense of belonging from those who do not. Both had some friends, but their closest friends were not a part of their congregation.

Finding 7: Encouragement versus involvement. Based on the results, 81% of the survey participants are involved in one activity. The majority (78%) of them reported being encouraged at a small to a great extent. Thus, it can be inferred that encouragement is an important factor in increasing involvement.

Finding 8: Roles versus decision-making. Based on the data, 31.9% of the survey participants reported being given the opportunity to participate in decision-making, but for some reason, chose not to. Of those, who often participate in decision-making, 50.6% of them have one or more roles. Overall, 43% of all participants have been given the opportunity to engage in decision-making and have either occasionally or often participate. Based on this data, it can be ascertained that despite the number of roles young adults are given, the majority do not engage in decision-making, even when given the opportunity.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Growing up in the church as a little girl, engaging in church activities was highly encouraged by my family, especially my grandmother. It was practiced early, and thus, continued into my teenager years. Even during college years, being involved in the church was an expectation not only by my family, but for myself. Becoming an adult and the wife of a pastor, it became more apparent that the engagement of the young adult population was dwindling or becoming nonexistent in the church. This study was developed in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the reasons for this decline. More specifically, it will help determine whether a sense of belonging in the church is connected to the active engagement of young adults, ages 21–39.

In this chapter, the researcher will discuss the findings for the data collected and determine how they relate to the SMC. The chapter will also connect the findings with the literature on belonging and engagement and discuss implications from the data. The final purpose of this chapter will be to make recommendations based on the implications for the church to consider in reaching out to the young adults in hopes of bringing them back to active and consistent engagement in the life the church. The loss of the young adult population has been a critical issue facing thousands of leaders of the SMC (SMC, 2016). This study will hopefully bring to light the concerns of the African American young adult population on the causes for this decline and provide some suggestions on what the SMC can do to increase engagement of the young adult population. Ultimately, the goal will be to provide answers and suggestions to not only African American young adults of the SMC, but to the church at large since this is not only an SMC concern but a universal church concern. This study may also help other organizations dealing with young adult retention and inclusion issues.

Summary of the Results The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between a sense of belonging and the active engagement of young adults in church ministries. The study used data from the United States Congregational Life Study (USCLS) conducted in 2001 as well as current data from interviews of six young adults in a defined region of the SMC in South Carolina. data were analyzed to find points of comparison and contrast between the two data sets.

Initially, the study focused on the four drives of motivation—acquire and achieve, bond and belong, challenged and comprehend, and define and defend. However, due to limited time, the study was later revised to focus specifically on the drive to bond and belong in relation to engagement. According to the literature, members of a community of faith must feel a sense of belonging and feel they are an important part of that community to benefit from their community of faith (Krause, 2016). A sense of community is one of the primary characteristics of the Christian faith tradition. Therefore, focusing on the drive to bond and belong was an important aspect to study the active engagement of the young adult population in the life of the church or any organization.

The existence of the young adult generation is vital to the growth and future of the church. When talking to people of various races and denomination about the population of their church, they all expressed the same concern—the decline or non-existence of the young adult population in the church. It is extremely important that church leaders understand the factors that motivate young adults to attend church if they want to increase and retain membership and active engagement of this population. A great deal of research can be found on why young adults say they are leaving the church, but there is limited research on this problem specifically in the Black church (Cooper, Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2016; Dyck, 2010; Kinnaman, 2011; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995). The SMC, like other denominations, seek solutions to this problem. It is important that the SMC, being the largest Black Methodist denomination and the first independent

Black denomination, maintains and retains active engagement of the young adult generation to secure the future growth of the denomination. Current church leaders must train young adults to be the future leaders of the church to ensure their future existence.

As previously stated, research on this lack of young adult involvement in the Black church is limited but becoming more prevalent. Organizations, such as the U.S. Congregational Life, have recently hired researchers to specifically focus on the Black church. Even though there are studies conducted by U.S. Congregation that include African American data, they typically represent only a small percentage of African Americans.

As it becomes an increasing problem, more studies are being conducted on this problem (DeVries & Pontier, 2019; Heck, 2019; Jones, 2019). Religious research organizations like the Barna Group, Pew Research Center, U.S. Congregations, and many others, have published studies and pieces of literature based on church growth and young adult engagement in the church dating back to more than 30 years. Since the inception of this study, even more studies have been published, and more research is still being conducted. This study may not solve the problem, but it will provide more insight into the problem and possible solutions.

Quantitative data. With limited data on the engagement of African American young adults in church ministry, the best data source for the quantitative portion of the study was a 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) completed by respondents who were members of the Presbyterian church and made available for download on the Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA). The USCLS is the nation's largest system of church surveys, and despite being over 18 years old, two of the purposes of the USCLS identified on the website are to assess change over time and to provide denominational leaders with information and resources to assist their congregations or denominations (www.uscongregations.org, 2019). This study incorporated data from the 2001 Racial Ethnic Presbyterian Attendee survey, which surveyed 13,043 worshippers

in a random sample of 171 predominately racial-ethnic or multicultural congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). However, for the purpose of this study, the data were disaggregated to focus on specific requirements. Therefore, the study analyzed data from the 372 participants that met the requirements of the study—African American and 21-39 years old.

The survey data taken from the USCLS focused on six factors (variables)—involvement, activities, roles, decision-making, friends, and encouragement—based on six questions from the full survey:

- Question 3: “Are you regularly involved in any group activities here?”
- Question 4: “Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community (e.g., visitation, evangelism, outreach, community service, social justice)?
- Question 5: “Do you currently have any of the following roles here?”
- Question 18: “Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this congregation?”
- Question 23: “Do you have any close friends in this congregation?”
- Question 27: “Have this congregation’s leaders encouraged you to find and use your gifts and skills here?” (Woolever, Wulff, Bruce, & Smith-Williams, 2002).

Using Question 19, “Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?” as the basis for determining a sense of belonging and not belonging, an analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the responses for each variable based on the two groups—belong and not belong.

Qualitative interviews. Qualitative data gathered through interviews provided current perspectives of six young adults in the SMC regarding their sense of belonging as it relates to active engagement in their local church. Despite not being a large source of data, the results

provided a snippet of the current views and perspectives of young adults in 2018 based on the participants' experiences compared to views and perspectives of the survey data from 2001. The two sources provided similarities and differences between these common factors (variables) from two different generations. The interview data provided a comparison of the two sources based on perspectives of two generations that showed similarities, as well as differences, that have affected their engagement in church ministries. There were six interview participants, a small sample of young adults, within the narrowly defined geographic setting. The interview questions were developed and paralleled with the same factors (variables) as the quantitative portion of this study:

I. Engagement (to include activities, ministry groups, and roles).

- A. What activities do you engage in at church or in support of your church, and how often do you engage in these activities?
- B. What roles or positions do you hold in the church?
- C. Can you tell me about young adults ages 18–39 who are engaged in the various activities or ministries of the church? What types of things are they engaged in? Can you share a few examples?
- D. According to a 2014 Religious Landscape Study, there is a decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within religious communities. Discuss whether you agree with this based on your experience, and why.
- E. What challenges, if any, have you seen in engaging or involving young adults age 18–39 in activities, ministries, and groups in the church, or young adults taking roles in the church?

II. Decision-Making.

- A. Describe how you or other young adults in your church are involved in decision-making for the church?
- B. In what ways does the church support you in feeling comfortable sharing your ideas and opinions in decision-making at the church? In what ways do you not feel included in decision-making at the church?

III. Friends.

- A. Could you describe a few of your relationships with other members of your congregation?
- B. If you have close friends in the congregation, can you describe those friendships and what makes them meaningful? If you do not have close friends in the congregation, can you discuss why you think this maybe?

IV. Encouragement—using gifts and skills.

- A. Describe how you use your gifts and skills in the church, and how you feel when you use them. How have your congregational leaders encouraged or not encouraged you in finding and using your gifts and skills for the church?

Each participant was also asked to rank their level of sense of belonging in their local church: “Using the following Likert scale from 1 to 6, how would you rate your level of sense of belonging in your church? 1–Very Poor, 2–Poor, 3–Fair, 4–Good, 5–Very Good, and 6–Excellent”

The results of this study will hopefully provide vital information to church leaders and lay persons who could ultimately turn the landscape of the church around. Churches have sought answers and suggestions to this issue for years. Considering the data source was from almost two different decades, and the literature references back to over three decades, this indicates that this is

not a new issue, but an on-going issue that churches have been trying to find solutions to for many years. In the remainder of this section, the researcher will discuss the results of the study based on each factor (variable).

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Results from the survey data analysis, as well as interviews with six SMC young adults, support the literature relating a sense of belonging to young adult engagement in the church. This study focused on six factors (variables) with a possible correlation to feeling a sense of belonging. The goal was to determine whether a sense of belonging influences active engagement of the African American young adult population (ages 21–39) in the church. This section will discuss results from both sources – survey and interview, as well as the literature to support the results.

Involvement. Church leaders who have put a lot of their focus on the young adult ministry of the church and have organized retreats, workshops, and activities to engage and empower young adults of the church. Ministries, such as these, are the tools the church needs if it seeks to increase and sustain young adult engagement. According to Stroope (2011), young adults seek a sense of belonging and bonding through their involvement in organizations which represents their beliefs. By being involved in religious activities, such as Bible studies and small groups, young adults can gain opportunities to experience this sense of belonging (Henderson, 2014)

The data from the USCLS showed that there was a significant difference in the involvement level of those who had a sense of belonging compared to those who did not feel a sense of belonging. The term “Involvement” for this survey referred to the participants’ level of engagement in group activities. Those who felt a sense of belonging were more involved in group activities than those who did not feel a sense of belonging. These group activities included such things as Sunday school or church school, prayer or Bible study groups, fellowships groups, and clubs, or other social groups. The results showed that participants of the USCLS were involved in

social groups more than any other type of group activity. As a matter of fact, more females, than males, were involved in fellowship, clubs, and social groups in the church.

Literature states that young adults must prioritize around the various overwhelming tasks of their day-to-day life (Becton, Walker, & Farmer, 2014). They are bombarded with distractions from pressures and work responsibilities, and their abundant choices for leisure and social activities. The data supports this finding. More than twice the number of participants of the USCLS, with a sense of belonging and no sense of belonging, was more involved with social groups than educational and devotional groups. Based on the interview responses, all six participants were actively engaged in one or more activities in their respective churches. They were actively involved with activities that involve the children and youth in the church, as well as music ministries, whether it is operating the sound system every Sunday, singing on a choir, or participating with the praise and worship team.

As previously stated, young adults are inundated with their various day-to-day activities, causing them to prioritize. Unfortunately, current young adults interviewed expressed the concern that church is not on the top of the priority list, due to factors such as their busy schedule and limited time. One interviewer stated that young adults tend to make other things a priority, and thus the church is low on the priority list. Therefore, even though young adults want to be involved in the church, it is not necessarily a priority.

Activity. Young adults look for active involvement and opportunities to make a real difference” (Siebert Foundation, 2015). They seek engagement where they can share a part of themselves with the intent to be impacted by that person in return (Feldmann et al., 2013). According to Schullery (2013), engaging young adults in meaningful activities is critical to avoiding an increased turnover in the workplace and the church. The USCLS asked young adults if they were regularly involved in any community or outreach ministries. The results showed that

those with a sense of belonging were more regularly involved in community service and outreach ministries. Approximately 45.2% of those who felt a sense of belonging regularly took part in some activity that reaches out to the wider community, such as community service, outreach, and evangelism.

Based on the interview data, the participants enjoyed the opportunity to visit the sick and shut-in members of the community, make care packages for military members abroad, as well as do lawn work for the church and those in the community. They responded that they like to fill in where they are needed. This supports the idea that millennials seek engagement where they can make an impact on the community by sharing a part of themselves (Feldmann et al., 2013). They want to be needed, and where they can do something significant, and use their talents. According to Rainer and Rainer (2011), Christian Millennials believe the church should be mission-oriented and present in the community, working to demonstrate the love of Christ, as opposed to working in the community for church-growth and financial purposes.

Roles. In this study, based on data gathered and statistically analyzed from the USCLS, those who had a sense of belonging were engaged in more roles than those who did not have a sense of belonging. Involving young adults in leadership roles where they can use their gifts and talents is key in developing lasting faith and engagement (Shaw & Constantineanu, 2016). Young Adults want to be needed and to be a significant part of an organization. According to Gantt (2018), young adults are leaving the church due to a lack of opportunities within ministries of their local church. Similarly, young adults report that they are staying because of the roles they play in their church (Parr & Crites, 2015). Although all roles in the church are important, the millennial generation wants to make a difference and feel the larger roles offer that opportunity. Larger roles are those roles that are typically held by adults and are outside of the youth/young adult ministries (Gantt, 2018). By having these larger roles, young adults reported that they felt more connected to

their local church. Based on the qualitative data gathered from Gantt's study on young adult leadership roles in the church, 12 word or phrases were heard continuously. Some of those same phrases were seen in the literature review for this study, as well as in the qualitative interview responses for this study. Common responses used to help explain why having larger roles helped young adults stay connected to the local church included building relationships, using their passions and gifts, feeling valued/important/needed, connecting them to older adults in the church, and giving them a sense of belonging (Gantt, 2018).

Based on the interview responses, the six respondents held various leadership roles in their respective church and felt that they were blessed to have been given those opportunities. One interviewer responded that based on discussions with young adults in other congregations, most leadership roles were not held by young adults in the 21–39 age range. The six interview participants of this study engaged in and held leadership roles in the Music Ministry (such as the choir and the Praise Team), the Usher Board, youth ministries, and a few on the governing boards (i.e., Steward Board and Trustee Board). Similarly, Gantt (2018) noted that young adults reported their top roles in church ministry were with the worship team/choir, welcome/usher team, audio visual team, and children's ministry. Gantt's findings can also be associated to the findings from the USCLS, which identified worship and music ministries being the top ministries young adults hold leadership roles. Governance roles, which could be considered as a larger or major role in the church, had the lowest percentage of young adult engagement. This show validation to Gantt's findings that larger roles were typically reserved for older adults; leaving young adults to feel that they are "not responsible enough, mature enough or valuable enough to contribute to God's mission" (Gantt, 2018, p. 47).

Another finding from the qualitative data were that young adults say they want to have leadership roles in their local church, but they find that many of the older members have held these

roles for many years and are not willing to pass it on to the younger generation to fulfill.

According to Participant 2 of the young adult interviews, “The challenges that I see with young adults taking roles in the church is that there are some people who are not willing to move out and let the young adults take those roles.” Participant 3 felt like “older adults don’t trust us or feel like we are not able to carry on the position task or responsibilities that they would like to entrust to us.” This lack of trust is also linked to the next factor—decision-making.

One interview participant felt that ignorance on how the church works is another challenge for the young adult population. Many young adults are afraid to take on roles because they do not understand the importance of each ministry and how they work individually and collectively in the church (Participant 4). Participant 4 stated that they [young adults] need to understand how the church works, how the ministries of the church work together to fulfill the church’s purpose, and how they as individuals fit in the operation and functions of the church.

Decision-Making. In this study, data from the USCLS indicated that those with a sense of belonging were more involved in decision-making in their congregation compared to those who feel no sense of belonging. It is interesting to note, however, that despite being given the opportunity to be involved in decision-making, there was almost one-third of young adults in both categories, who felt and did not feel a sense of belonging, who chose to not get involved in decision-making. Being included in the decision-making process of church ministries was a major concern of the six interview participants. Considering only a small sample of the young adult population was interviewed, there were mixed opinions of feeling included in the decision-making process at their respective church. Even though some of them are church officers and are afforded the opportunity to participate in decision-making, some feel like their voice is not heard or their opinion is not always considered or appreciated. Some interview participants said such things as, “I sometimes feel that they don’t trust my opinion and thus are not accepting or willing to consider

it” (Participant 1) or “When suggestions are made, the older adults don’t consider or allow us, young adults, to have a say in anything” (Participant 3). According to Thumma and Bird (2011), many young adults said their opinions and feelings are not heard by church leaders, especially older members and church leaders. On the other hand, other participants said, “My church makes me feel very comfortable expressing my opinions and ideas” (Participant 4), or “I also have the opportunity to voice my concerns during official board meetings on new policies and/or changes that are or need to be made” (Participant 2).

Studies show that allowing young adults to engage in decision-making can be beneficial to an organization. Based on a study of 19 youth and 29 adults in 15 different organizations across the U.S. (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000), evidence shows that young people have “powerful and positive effects on adults and organizations” (Murdock, Paterson, & Gatmaitan, 2008, para. 1). Not only do young people benefit when they take on decision-making roles in organizations, but so do the adults and the organization in which young people are involved. The researchers in the study, “Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth and Adults and Organizations” discovered a change in attitudes toward young people enhanced commitment to organizations, increased sense of competence in working with youth, and a stronger sense of community connectedness (Murdock, Paterson, & Gatmaitan, 2008).

According to Lincoln and Mamiya (2003), young adults show greater participation and involvement when given the opportunity to participate in leadership roles and decision making of the church. The literature supports the data from the USCLS which showed that based on the cross-tabulation of roles and decision-making, of those, who often participate in decision-making, 50.6% of them have one or more roles. Thus, it can be inferred that when young adults are given leadership roles, there is more opportunity for participating in decision-making. When both factors are present, there will be an increased engagement of young adult in church ministries.

Friends. According to Barna Group (2013a), 59% of young adults who are actively engaged in the church have a close friend at the church; and 28% have established a relationship with an adult other than the pastor or a church staff member. Even though data from the USCLS show no significant difference between the number of friends in the congregations of young adults with a sense of belonging compared to those without a sense of belonging, Henderson (2014) stated that interpersonal relationships encourage and promote a sense of belonging in the congregational life of young adults. Barna Group (2013a) revealed that establishing meaningful relationships is an important factor in facilitating a lasting and active engagement of young adults in the church. Unfortunately, teens and young adults are leaving the church and reporting fewer meaningful relationships (Horan, 2017).

Based on the USCLS, those with a sense of belonging and those without a sense of belonging reported having some close friends in their congregation, but their closest friends were not a part of their congregation. Even though, a sense of belonging is not affected by the friendships established in the congregation, having some close friends in their respective congregation is a factor. This was also evident based on data collected from interviews of current young adults. Interview participants stated that even though most of their close friends are not a part of their congregation, establishing relationships with others provide guidance, advice, and mentoring opportunities. Results from the USCLS and the interview responses show a connection between having close friends, mentors, intergenerational relationships, and being encouraged—the next factor of this study.

Encouragement. Genuine care, unconditional love, and support are important to young adults. Establishing relationships that make them feel loved, welcomed, and cared for is also important. Analysis of the USCLS showed that those who have a sense of belonging felt more encouraged than those who do not. According to the data, 91.9% of those that feel a sense of

belonging felt encouraged to use their gifts and skills, while 3.7% felt no encouragement at all. On the other hand, 46.2% of those who felt no sense of belonging did not feel encouraged at all or did not know if they felt encouraged by their church leaders. A study by Rainer and Rainer (2011) identified the top 10 concerns and challenges of young adults. Young adults revealed that they seek help [encouragement] from others such as mentors and the church to help them understand, deal with, and overcome these challenges. Young adults expressed the significant impact having intergenerational mentoring relationships have had on their decision to remain involved in the church.

Interview participants of this study expressed the importance of having mentors to encourage them and keep them on track. One participant stated that these encouragers are like mentors and spiritual leaders. Another participant stated that some members give encouragement through guidance and advice. Another participant stated that there are people in the congregation that “I can depend on when things are not going the best to encourage me and help me along the way” (Participant 2).

Interview participants also expressed having the opportunity to not only be mentored but to be mentors [encouragers] for younger church members. According to Brown (2016), intergenerational relationships create a sense of belonging and opportunities for meaningfully contributing to, and being a part of, the church body. Literature also states that millennials are relational and desire intergenerational relationships (Horan, 2017). These intergenerational relationships create a sense of belonging and encouragement, which supports the quantitative and qualitative results of this study.

According to literature, young adults want to be involved in church ministries but are not sure where they fit in (Nestor, 1993). Many are blessed with gifts, talents, and skills that are unknown and uncultivated. By finding their spiritual gifts and gaining a better understanding of the

role they play in the ministry of the church, young adults will better see a connection with the ministry and their life and needs. In this study, four of the six interview participants stated that they were encouraged to use their gifts and skills in the church. Two out of six participants said they were either not encouraged at all, or encouraged, but did not feel supported to use their gifts and skills in the church. One participant stated that some young adults are not encouraged to use their gifts or do not understand the role their gifts can play in the church, and thus are apprehensive about becoming involved. On the other hand, there are some participants that said they feel good when they use their gifts, but when it is felt that they are unappreciated, they would rather than be involved. Thus, encouragement is important in motivating young adults to not only understand their purpose but to also put their gifts and skills to work in the church.

Limitations

Even though this study focused on an issue that is not new to the church, it is still a relevant and current phenomenon. Research on this specific group of subjects, 21 to 39-year old African Americans, is very limited. Thus, finding data were not an easy task. Despite data being disaggregated from an ethnic study conducted almost 20 years ago in the Presbyterian Church, it provided the best source for understanding the congregational life of the African American young adults. Due to limited time and having to change the methodology of the study several times, current data were gathered from a very small sample of young adults in the Southeastern Methodist Church (SMC), the denomination this study focused on originally. The initial idea was to use a much larger sample of young adults from the SMC, but the concern was the limited time available to conduct the research. Therefore, it might be beneficial to extend the study to a larger sample of young adults in the SMC to get more current and comparable data.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

This study was framed around the fact that the lack of active engagement of young adult church members continue to decrease (Barna Group, 2013b). No consensus has been found on what specific factors have led to this decrease. However, based on the findings of this study, young adults are becoming less engaged due to not feeling a sense of belonging. Results of this study do indicate that feeling a sense of belonging (Lawrence & Nohria, 2002) is an important factor in increasing engagement of young adults in the life of the church. This sense of belonging is prompted by the factors discussed in this study. It is not an isolated feeling or emotion, but it is triggered by being involved in activities, having roles, participating in decision-making, and being encouraged through relationships—mentoring and intergenerational. Young adults who did not feel a sense of belonging were less engaged in church ministries and activities, had less roles in the church, and felt less encouragement from church leaders and older church members. Therefore, these factors are worth the focus of the church and other organization that wants to get and keep the young adults engaged, especially those between 21 and 39 years old. Church leaders should establish opportunities for these factors to be utilized in the life of young adults in their respective churches.

Despite the data sources from different generations of young adults in 2001 versus young adults in 2018, the results could provide important and eye-opening implications for all involved. The results showed that much has not changed for young adults over this 18-year period in relation to how their sense of belonging has affected their level of engagement in the church, as well as what the church has done to increase their engagement. As mentioned earlier, the data source was from almost two different decades, and the literature points back to over three decades, indicating that this has been an on-going issue that churches have sought suggestions, recommendations, and solutions on for some time. The results will hopefully provide another path for religious scholars

and religious researchers to explore how churches, as well as organizations, can implement strategies to promote a sense of belong that will increase engagement of young adults in their local church and respective organization. Based on the results from both the qualitative and quantitative portions of this study, several implications can be established.

The literature and data gathered, especially from the interviews, points to the fact that young adults are interested in church leaders making them feel like they belong and is a vital part of the ministry. Thus, one implication for church leaders, mainly pastors, is the need to provide more intergenerational opportunities, such as mentoring opportunities between older adult church leaders and younger adult church leaders or future young adult church leaders. According to Gantt (2011), mentor-type relationships like this is needed to help young adult mature and cultivate the skills necessary to lead. Opportunities such as this will not only help in bridging the gaps between the generations but may help eliminate the lack of trust older adults may feel towards young adults accepting leadership roles.

Even though the results show that young adults hold roles in various church ministry, only 9.9% hold governance roles—the lowest percentage of all role categories. If young adults are to be effective future leaders of the church. It is important that church leaders provide more opportunities to serve in governance roles. By engaging more young adults in governance roles, young adults will gain more opportunities for participating in decision-making. This may not only increase their sense of belonging, but it will help them to develop and utilize their skills, gifts, and talents, as well as help them learn more about how the church operates. Ultimately, serving in more governance roles can prepare them to be effective leaders of the church.

It has been determined that a sense of belonging has a correlation with encouragement. Based on the results, 46.2% of young adults who did not have a sense of belonging did not feel encouraged at all or did not know if they felt encouraged by their church leaders. This implies that

there is a great need for older adults to mentor young adults to not only teach them about the church but to give them guidance and advice. Young adults must feel welcomed and encouraged. A friendly smile, word, handshake, or hug may be all the encouragement these young adults need to feel like they belong and is a vital part of the ministry.

One interview participant suggested that many young adults are afraid to take on various roles in the church because they do not understand the importance of the ministry and how the ministries work individually and collectively in the church (Participant 4). This implies that church leaders need to do more to promote and educate young adults about the various ministries of the church, as well as help them [young adults] discover their own gifts and how they can be used in the various ministries. As Nestor (1993) suggested, young adults will become more engaged in church ministries when they gain a better understanding of their spiritual gifts and how these gifts function in the church.

The focus of this study was motivating young adults to sustain engagement in church ministries. Thus, the researcher sought to understand what relationship exists for young African American adults between their sense of belonging in a church and level of engagement in church ministries. Even though the focus of this study was only on one of the four drives (i.e., the drive to bond and belong), according to Lee and Raschke (2016), the four drives together can best improve motivation. The four drives—to acquire and achieve, to bond and belong, to challenge and comprehend, and to define and defend—all include in some aspect one or more of the six factors focused on in this study. Based on the data, young adults who are involved in church activities, hold leadership roles, participate in decision-making, have meaningful relationship, and feel encouraged by church leaders and older adults are more engaged in church ministries. Based on the findings, young adults want to be involved in activities, as well as achieve and acquire leadership roles that will give them the opportunity to participate in decision-making. They want

to bond and belong to create encouraging and meaningful relationships. They want to comprehend and understand how the church works so that they can acquire these roles and make important decisions in the church. They also want to be understood and accepted for what they believe in. Finally, they want to define and defend their purpose and the purpose of the organizations they represent and of which they are a part.

The 2001 and 2019 data has shown that the decrease in young adult engagement in the church is not a new phenomenon, and much has not changed in how young adults over the past 18 years have perceived their sense of belonging and its impact on their engagement in church ministries. Young adults report that they desire to be engaged, so it is imperative that churches and organizations find ways to make young adults feel like they belong so that they will be motivated to facilitate lasting engagement in the life of the church. Young adults are the future leaders of the church, and without their involvement, the church will not only lose its standing in the community but may become a non-existence.

Recommendations for Further Research

As mentioned in the section on limitations, due to limited time in gathering data for this study, a small sample was used for qualitative data. Thus, it would be advantageous to extend this study to a larger sample of young adults in the SMC. With the SMC being a connectional church, it is possible to gain easier access to the over 600 churches in the southeastern state where the study was conducted by making contact and seeking help from various ministries within the church, or even the church's Christian education department. It would also benefit the SMC, and other organizations in general, to expand the focus to all four drives of engagement and motivation as identified by Lawrence and Nohria (2002)—acquire/achieve, bond/belong, challenged/comprehend, and define/defend. According to Lawrence and Nohria (2002), these four drives have led to high levels of engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and a reduced intention to

quit, and ultimately better, performance; which is what church leaders want for not only the young adult population but for all members.

It is troubling to see that only one-third of young adults still did not participate in decision making despite being provided the opportunity. Considering that research shows that young adults want to be involved and want their voices to be heard, it is questionable and worth further study to determine why these young adults chose not to participate in decision making even though the opportunity was presented. Research has shown that young adults feel that older adults are judgmental, do not listen to them, and do not trust their judgment. So, it is possible that young adults may take the stance that it is a waste of their time to be involved when they are not fully accepted or as one interview participant called it, “not appreciated”. Thus, further research may better answer this question and help leaders make the necessary changes to motivate and encourage young adults to participate.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that many congregations have a dying young adult presence. There is a continuous decrease in the attendance and engagement of young adults in the 21–39 age range. Unfortunately, when there is a dying young adult presence, we find a dying church. Young adults represent the future leaders of the church, and thus many churches have sought solutions to combat this issue. Unfortunately, no consensus has been discovered in identifying specific reasons for this decline in presence and engagement. However, based on many studies that have been conducted, suggestions have been made on how to engage and retain young adults in church ministries based on characteristics of millennials and Gen Xers. All of these suggestions are centered around one main theme—a sense of belonging, which is identified as an important and powerful need (Krause, 2016; Stroope, 2011). Therefore, this the researcher in this study sought to determine if there is a

relationship between a sense of belonging and the active engagement of young adults in church ministries.

After gathering, analyzing, and comparing survey data from 2001 with qualitative data from 2018, it was determined that there is a connection between a sense of belonging and engagement. The purpose of using data from these two sources was to find similarities and differences that have affected their engagement in church ministries based on perspectives of the two generations. The study determined that there were many similarities in their perspectives and most importantly, that young adults who felt a sense of belonging were more engaged in church ministries. This sense of belonging in the church, or any organization, is dependent upon several factors. These factors included being involved in group activities, engaging in community/outreach activities, having roles in church organizations or ministries, participating in decision making, and being encouraged by church leaders and older adults. Young adults who found satisfaction with these factors were motivated to engage more in the church because they felt a bond or sense of belonging. Young adults reported a sense of satisfaction in using their gifts, skills, and talents to promote ministry and to fulfill a spiritual mission. They had found their place of importance in the work of ministry.

However, this study also determined that there is still more work to be done; there are still many more young adults that need to be reached in order to reverse this decline in engagement. This study will hopefully be a voice for those young adults who desire to be more engaged in the church, as well as a resource to encourage church leaders to dedicate more time and energy into making this dying generation feel a sense of belonging and the drive to increase their engagement.

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Appendix A: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Cynthia M. Williams

Digital Signature

Cynthia M. Williams

Name (Typed)

September 4, 2019

Date

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Who is needed?

Young Adults (ages 21-39) in the church

Purpose of the Study?

To examine the relationship between the drive to bond and belong and active engagement of young adults in the church.

Why is this research important?

This research will help leadership on all levels of the church gain a better understanding of why talented young adults are leaving the church and how to increase active engagement of young adults ages 21-39.

Who Am I?

- ♦ Cynthia M. O. Williams
- ♦ Doctoral student at Concordia University, Portland, OR, working on a Doctoral - Research Project
- ♦ Wife of a pastor
- ♦ Member and PK Coordinator of the minister's spouses organization
- ♦ Member and Immediate Past Treasurer of the women's missionary society
- ♦ Mother of Two Teenagers
- ♦ Math Teacher for 24 Years



Your Participation would greatly be appreciated.

Please contact . . .

Cynthia M. O. Williams

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Engagement—Activities, Ministry Groups, and Roles

1. What activities do you engage in at church or in support of your church, and how often do you engage in these activities?
2. What roles or positions do you hold in the church?
 - For example, are you
 - A member of the governing board, a congregational committee, or a task force;
 - A worship leader or a member of the worship team;
 - An officer or leader of a church group; choir member, musician, choir director; church school or Sunday school teacher; or
 - Serving in any other role.
3. Can you tell me about young adults ages 18–39 who are engaged in the various activities or ministries of the church? What types of things are they engaged in? Can you share a few examples?
4. According to a 2014 Religious Landscape Study, there is a decline in the presence and engagement of the young adult population within religious communities. Discuss whether you agree with this based on your experience, and why.
5. What challenges, if any, have you seen in engaging or involving young adults age 18-39 in activities, ministries, and groups in the church, or young adults taking roles in the church?

Decision-Making

6. Describe how you or other young adults in your church are involved in decision-making for the church?
7. In what ways does the church support you in feeling comfortable sharing your ideas and opinions in decision-making at the church? In what ways do you not feel included in decision-making at the church?

Friends

8. Could you describe a few of your relationships with other members of your congregation?
9. If you have close friends in the congregation, can you describe those friendships and what makes them meaningful? If you do not have close friends in the congregation, can you discuss why you think this may be?

Encouragement—Using Gifts and Skills

10. Describe how you use your gifts and skills in the church, and how you feel when you use them.
11. How have your congregational leaders encouraged or not encouraged you in finding and using your gifts and skills for the church?

Sense of Belonging

12. A sense of belonging is described as an accepted and important member of a group.
13. Using the following Likert scale from 1 to 6, how would you rate your level of Sense of Belonging in your church?

1 – Very Poor; 2 – Poor; 3 – Fair; 4 – Good; 5 – Very Good; 6 - Excellent Your score: